Table of contents

Prologue
First Bone: Kim-un-kamuy’s Bride
Second bone: Kunnerekkamuy Sings in Nightmares
Epilogue
Special short story: Sleeping Plant Bulb

Prologue

Sakurako-san doesn't seem upset, or even afraid, that Hanabusa might have been in her house and listening in on all of her conversations. We head to a cafe that's attached to a burger shop near a bookstore to get away from the house.

"If he wants to listen to us, we should just let him," she says in a dignified manner.

I realize, once again, that she and I are different. I've been getting a strange, chilling feeling ever since.

The inside of the cafe is quite hot, probably because people come in here to get out of the cold for a while. Even my hot chocolate with frothed milk isn't enough to warm me up. It's not just from watching the people walking outside in the cold, or from the early nightfall. There is a vague, indescribable anxiety that's stealing the warmth from inside me.

"He already seems to know so much about us that there's no point in being embarrassed about him knowing all about your personal life. If he wanted to use that to hurt us, he would have done so by now. Not that I have anything to be ashamed of," she says, leaning back while sipping her hot chocolate.

That's such a "her" thing to say. I still think it would be best to tell Gran.

"No, it's not important enough to tell Ume. She's old, she just wants to live a peaceful, quiet life. Besides, she's sharp. If someone dangerous approaches her, she'll know right away. When I was young, I once asked her to run some errands so I could steal candy while she was out. She found me out right away."

I'm pretty sure that even I would be able to tell what she was trying to do. Still, I agree that we shouldn't make Gran anxious. I'm constantly keeping an eye on everyone who walks by and jumping at every sound, now. I don't want Gran to have to live like that.

I've seen many people who have killed others. Not just other humans, but people who have killed helpless animals, too. The feeling I got from those people wasn't just malice, ferocity, or

irrationality, but also the feeling that they thought it was necessary. They thought it *had to be done.* They kill because they have to. Something is driving them to kill. As a third party looking in, I always feel that there were other options, but the person themself always thinks that what they did was the only choice left.

But Hanabusa isn't like that. He looks at his options, and calmly chooses to take someone's life. Perhaps he thinks of himself as an executioner, or a saint. He has his own set of rules. Just like Sakurako-san with her bone collecting. She only takes bones from animals that have already died, she never kills them.

Luckily, Gran seems to be safe from Hanabusa, since she's a kind and good person. Hanabusa only takes the sphenoid bone from bad people.

"It would be terrible if Hanabusa panicked and hurt Gran because he thought she was onto him… I'll try to act the same as always around her."

"That's true. Someone has gotten into the house at least once, so we don't know where they're listening from. From now on, we should only talk about things related to Hanabusa outside. We should have some sort of indicator phrase, as well."

"How about 'Hector, let's go for a walk,' then? That way it seems natural to leave the house, right?"

Sakurako-san smiles and nods at my suggestion as she takes another sip of her hot chocolate. The way she licks the light brown foam off her lips is strangely charming. I wonder if Hanabusa really only set up a listening device, or if he has some sort of video surveillance, too…

"I guess we just have to wait for Hanabusa to make some kind of mistake and give himself away, though."

"He doesn't make mistakes," Sakurako-san mutters, frustrated. No matter how much she chases him, as soon as she tries to grab him, Hanabusa vanishes like a mirage.

"Hm?"

"There's no chance he'll make a mistake. He's too thorough. He's done this enough times to perfect it."

“But maybe he’s gotten used to it and will let his guard down…” I say, but she laughs me off.

“You think he’d let his guard down while committing such a serious crime like killing someone? It’s true that people can get complacent, which leads to mistakes. Murder is different, though. It’s part of his identity. He wouldn’t let his guard down while doing something so important,” Sakurako-san says, then abruptly grabs my hand on top of the table. “I’ve decided to focus on every minute-every second. I’ll sharpen my senses, feel every cell in my body, love, cherish, and enjoy each moment. The same way I love bones.”

Sakurako-san takes her long fingers on her broad hands and pushes down my fingers, one by one, as if to count them. Her hands are so warm, the temperature surprises me. I quickly pull my hand away. Sakurako-san blinks at me once, as if she’s surprised by my strength.

“But… There’s no way to get near him, is there?”

“No, that’s not necessarily the case.”

“But he doesn’t make mistakes, either.”

She gives me a faint smile. “Rather than mistakes, there can be things he wants us to notice intentionally. He’s a serial offender who wants to show off his crimes.”

“Then… He’s going to give us hints on purpose?”

“Yeah,” Sakurako-san nods, looking as if she’s enjoying herself somehow. She leans harder against the back of her chair. Out the window behind her, the sun has set and the city is cast in a navy blue shadow. “Also… This is just me speculating, but if he really did make a mistake, it would be due to some kind of ‘change.’”

“A change?”

“Right. It could be that he had to move differently from before, or the situation suddenly changed. It could either be something environmental, or something changed in his mind.”

“Then, you mean… Hanabusa himself has changed?”

She nods deeply, and crosses her legs. “I can’t deny it, especially seeing as how his crimes have changed over time. Besides… Nothing ever stays the same forever. You used to vomit at

the sight of a corpse, but now you can even eat like normal after seeing one."

"That's… true…"

I probably shouldn't be saying this about myself, but I consider myself to be easily influenced by others. Hanabusa and Sakurako-san are a little bit different, though. They seem to live in their own world, where nobody can trespass. Sakurako-san gently shakes her head, as if she can read my thoughts.

"You may not have noticed it, but I've changed a lot… Even someone like me can change as a result of external stimuli," Sakurako-san says seriously.

I feel a strange mixture of joy and anxiety.

"I wonder if it's been a good change?" I say timidly. I take a sip of my hot chocolate to hide my confusion. I can't stand it anymore.

"I wonder… My life has certainly gotten noisier. Prior to two years ago, I spent every day in silence." Sakurako-san takes a moment to think about my question, then responds in a lonely voice.

"That's mostly because you have Hector now, not because of me…"

"If it weren't for you, I never would have adopted Hector in the first place. By the way, I never said it was a bad thing. Though it can be bothersome at times," she says with a wry smile. "At least Gran is happy. I always felt sorry for her. Thanks to you coming to visit, and having a dog around, we talk a lot more than we used to."

At my age, I find it a little bit embarrassing to make idle conversation with my mom every day, and I never know what to talk about. When Hector was staying with us, he always sparked a conversation. I'd really like to get a dog, but considering my future career path, it doesn't seem possible. I still don't know if I'll stay in Asahikawa, move to Sapporo, or even leave Hokkaido.

Now that I think about it, by next year I may not be able to have tea with Sakurako-san like this. Once I have to start studying for entrance exams, the amount of times I visit her will certainly decrease. Azechi occasionally mentions that her time with Kougami, Imai, and I will end soon. It won't be long until the Sakurako-san and I's hourglass runs out of sand.

First Bone: Kim-un-kamuy's Bride

Part 1

"Speaking of Gran, when is her birthday?" I ask Sakurako-san.

The dry winter air makes the inside of my nose sting. Sakurako-san and I are taking Hector on an evening walk at the park near her house. Kougami mentioned that she was so worried about making Azechi's birthday special that she had a stomach ache. I can smell dinner cooking from a nearby house, and instantly recognize that it's the scent of fried shrimp, which reminds me of Gran.

"I tried asking her before, but she just laughed and said there was no need to worry about her."

"Ume's birthday… I think it was… In November or December."

We're walking a slightly different way from normal, so Hector looks up at Sakurako-san as if to ask, "are you sure about this?" I'm the one holding his leash, so why is he looking at her?

"Really? It's coming up soon, then. How can you not remember her birthday, even though you're family?"

"Ume is a servant."

Those two have lived together for so long that it's no exaggeration to say they're like family. Their relationship isn't quite like a Grandmother and Granddaughter. Their relationship is strange, but the same thing could be said about Sakurako-san and I's relationship. I know the two of them don't really celebrate their birthdays, but I think it would be nice for them to deviate from the norm once in a while.

"We should do something to celebrate!"

"Celebrate…" Sakurako-san doesn't seem to approve of my idea.

"We can invite everyone over for a party, and go somewhere that she has lots of fond memories of… She said before that she's from Nukabira, right? Maybe we could go there? We could make it a day trip to the hot springs."

"…Hmm."

Sakurako-san seemed unenthusiastic at first, but as soon as I mention Nukabira, she starts to look excited.

“Nukabira sounds good. The Higashidaisetsu Museum has a splendid collection of skeletons, and it would be easier to do field work before the snow piles up. There are so many brown bears there that even I can’t walk around carelessly.”

“…Well, that’s nice, but…”

Shouldn’t we do things that Gran likes instead? Well, I’ve always wanted to see the Taushubetsugawa Bridge for some reason, so maybe I shouldn’t call the kettle black.

“I was actually talking about Nukabira with Sawa-san the other day. His relatives run a ryokan up there, so maybe we can invite him for the weekend.”

In order to keep our plan a surprise from Gran, and also keep Hanabusa from finding out, we don’t discuss the trip in Sakurako-san’s house. My plan quickly starts to take shape. Sawa-san says that the zoo will be closed for winter holidays at that time, so he can take a day off. (That said, they do a lot of cleaning and maintenance on the facilities, so he’s still busy overseeing things…)

The plan was originally to make it a day trip, but we soon realize that if we want Gran to be able to have a day to relax as well as time to go sightseeing, it’d be better to do an overnight stay. Sawa-san came with me to explain our plans to my mom. She said she doesn’t see a problem with it. I’m sure I won’t have many opportunities for things like this next year.

And so, the days passed quickly until the first Saturday of November. Sawa-san and I arrive at the Kujou house in the morning. Gran is bewildered when we tell her we’re taking her on an overnight trip, and help her bring her stuff to Sawa-san’s car. Hector is coming with us today, too.

When she sees the happy, fluffy, white dog sticking his nose out the window, she says “Heitarou, your nose is going to get chopped off!” to him. “Goodness, what a commotion,” she says, frowning.

“Um… Actually, it’s to celebrate your birthday.”

“Hm?”

I timidly explain, but Gan just looks puzzled. “Um, well… Sakurako-san said your birthday is at this time of year, so…”

“Mine? What are you talking about, I was born in May. I was named Ume because it’s the season of plum blossoms.”

“What?!”

Gran glances at Sakurako-san in the passenger seat through the mirror. Sakurako-san quickly looks away.

“Young miss, it was the lady of the house who was born in December…” Gran says with a sharp glare, but Sakurako-san has a blank expression.

“Hm, is that so? Well, a mere six months passes quickly, so it’s no problem.”

No, this isn’t fine at all. This isn’t a *mere* six months.

“Honestly, I’ve been wondering about that, too,” Sawa-san murmurs from the driver’s seat.

If Sakurako-san was born during cherry blossom season, then of course Ume-san would be born during plum blossom season. I’m embarrassed that I didn’t think of that.

“Well… Plum blossoms are an auspicious flower, so I thought you could have been named that for a reason other than the time of year. Even if six months is too early to celebrate your birthday, Sawa-san and I thought the timing would be good right now, so let’s go.”

It’s the perfect time to take a holiday, since the leaves have finished changing to their fall colours , but winter hasn’t fully set in yet.

“Besides, I might be too busy studying for entrance exams next year.”

A slight smile finally appears on Gran’s lips.

“I suppose… If you say so, young master. It’ll be nice to return to my hometown for the first time in a long while… The hot springs really are incredible there,” Gran says happily.

Hector puts his paws on Gran’s leg, fighting with Gran over who gets to look out the window. Gran looks a little happy about it. Still, I can’t believe how heartless Sakurako-san is to not even know

Gran's birthday… Is what I'd like to say, but I mix up my Grandmas' birthdays, too. Sakurako-san must see Gran as her Grandmother, deep down. I decide that I'll do my best to help Sakurako-san show Gran how much she cares,

Part 2

Nukabira is located to the bottom right of Asahikawa, and is known for its hot springs. It's in the town Kamishoro, which is in the Tokachi subprefecture. My relatives also live there. It's a small, quiet town located at the foot of Mt. Daisetsuzan, and it takes around 3 hours to drive there from Asahikawa. After passing Souunkyou and getting ice cream at Mikuni Pass, we continue down the road surrounded by the blue sky and autumn leaves.

I open the window just a crack so Hector can stick his nose out. He turns to me and smiles like he's saying, "I don't know this place! It's fun!" I rub his stomach and occasionally bury my face in his white fur. The 3 hour drive passes in a flash.

Apparently Nukabira is called that because it means "cliff sculpture" in the Ainu language. I wonder what cliff it refers to. This place seems to be filled with a lot more trees than rocks.

The hot springs were discovered in 1919, and now it has over 10 inns. The Shihoro Line passed through Nukabira, but it was discontinued in 1987. It used to have a prospering forestry industry, but all of that has closed down due to aging equipment and the difficult transporting goods. Honestly, I can't deny that it gives the impression that the town is on the decline, though it's the off season right now, since it's too late for the fall leaves, and too early for skiing.

Still, Gran seems happy. At her request, we head to the spot near Horoka station where she used to live. The station's sign and the railroad tracks were left behind, but other than that, there's nothing here. The cold wind rustles the field of bamboo grass, stinging nettle, and knotweed that have dried up for the winter. The hollow rustling sound echoes across the empty railroad tracks, making it seem even more lonely.

“Please be careful around the stinging nettle,” Sakurako-san says to me, or rather, to Gran who is walking beside me.

The four of us get out of the car to take a look, leaving Hector behind even though he really wanted to come.

“Fufufu, there’s really nothing here,” Gran mutters while staring out into the distance.

I’m not sure if she heard Sakurako-san’s warning or not. I’m surprised to see that there isn’t a single trace of the place where Gran used to live. It’s hard to imagine that there used to be a village here. It’s completely overgrown with trees now.

“You might not believe this, but… Around 50 years ago, there were dozens of stores, and over 300 people living here,” Gran says with a sad and shy smile.

“Oh… Now that you mention it, I can see where the foundation used to be.” If I look closely, I can see a spot where the weeds are broken up in a clearing.

“A long time ago, a horrible typhoon called Toya Maru hit Hokkaido, and knocked down a lot of trees. Lots of working people settled here afterwards, along with lots of merchants. My father was a carpenter who came here back then,” Gran whispers. She looks out at what used to be her hometown, now empty. “But once all the trees were cleared up, and the roads were back to normal, everyone left.”

Gran’s family moved from Horoka to Asahikawa when she was young, but I’m surprised at how this place where people used to live has been completely swallowed by the forest.

“There’s no avoiding it. Anything left to the elements will degrade quickly. Even the bone exhibit at Asahiyama Zoo is difficult to maintain. If there is no one left to watch until the end, it’s only natural for things to disappear,” Sakurako-san says, rubbing her arms to keep warm.

“Well, they just need to be handled carefully and protected from UV light. All it takes is trial and error,” Sawa-san says.

Sawa-san is also from this area. “Still, it makes you feel lonely,” he mutters.

“Once there’s nobody left to leave the village, it will cease to exist. It’s just like ‘the remains of a warrior’s dream.’”

“Come on, let’s get going,” Sawa-san gently says to Gran, inviting her into the car.

She looks very reluctant to leave, but eventually decides that she has to go. I think she could have stayed and looked for a bit longer, but then we’d never end up leaving. No matter how long she stares at this lonely place, it’ll never be the same as it once was.

When we get back to the car, Sawa-san puts on his most cheerful expression and says, “Man was it cold out there! I’m hungry now.”

“Well it is winter, and it’s noon now. Where are some good places to eat in Nukabira?”

“There are quite a few good places, actually. I’m sure the boy will be happy to hear that the venison is great here~”

Before I can even respond, my stomach growls. Gran laughs at me.

“We’d better get lunch before the young master starves to death.”

I try to search for a restaurant on my phone, but I don’t get a signal out here.

“Ah, I don’t get cell service here. There are lots of deer in the area, but even if we crash, we won’t be able to call for help. If the car breaks down, we’ll have no choice but to walk and get eaten by bears.”

“Urk, there’ll be no saving us.”

Collisions with deer are really scary. Deer can suddenly jump out in front of a car, and it isn’t always just one at a time. Yezo sika deer are huge, too. When I think of deer, I usually think of the cute little ones in Nara, but Yezo deer are twice as big as those ones. A large male with horns almost looks like a horse you could ride. Naturally, cars don’t get out of the crash unscathed, either. The deer will get scared and run away, but the car will be totaled and unable to move… It’s no laughing matter for rural Hokkaido citizens.

“It’s not just here. You should all be careful when you’re driving, no matter where you are,” Gran says uneasily.

It feels kind of novel to be included in that statement. She knows I'm planning to get my driver's license in a few years. Times like these, and whenever I'm taking an exam, I get the feeling like I'm getting closer to becoming an adult. I've always wanted to grow up, and become an adult faster, especially over this past year. I want to be Sakurako-san's equal, and be able to protect her. I wonder why I feel more and more anxious as I become closer to becoming an adult, despite wanting to grow up fast.

Hector looks over his shoulder at me, smiling. He licks my cheek, as if he's telling me everything will be okay. Having a dog tell you it'll be okay isn't very reliable, but petting Hector makes me happy. I feel like I've been tricked, somehow.

Meanwhile, the car has entered the urban area. As soon as we enter the town, a family of deer crosses the street, making everyone in the car laugh.

Part 3

We head to the restaurant that Sawa-san recommended. It's a large establishment that's run by a nearby hot spring inn, and has a large menu. I, of course, ordered the venison bowl. My stomach won't accept anything other than venison right now. It just won't. Sawa-san and Gran both got the jingisukan special, while Sakurako-san chose the napolitan.

My venison bowl arrives with a sweet and salty flavouring , similar to a beef bowl. Deer meat can sometimes be tough and gamey, but this dish is tender, odourless , and flavourful. The meat has just the right amount of elasticity, and the more I chew, the more of the deer flavour comes out. The rice and onions have just the right texture, and pair well with the sweet and salty sauce from the meat, while also serving as a nice break between bites of meat.

The small bowl of red ginger that came as a palate cleanser is delicious, too. There's sweet, candied pond smelt, and strongly flavoured pickled alpine leeks. I like to pick wild vegetables with my Mountain Grandpa, so I can appreciate the flavour of good alpine leeks. They're so good!

Gran says that her jingisukan is too much food for her to eat… She ate about half of her yummy looking food, and shared the rest with me. The jingisukan has a distinct, gamey scent. The flavour is so strong that I end up ordering a second serving of rice to go with it.

Sakurako-san also only eats about half of her napolitan spaghetti, and ends up asking for some shiruko. It's not that she doesn't like the spaghetti, it's more like she just wants shiruko.

It's still a bit too early for our check in time, but with full stomachs, we head to our lodging anyway. Sawa-san has asked an acquaintance of his to take us on a guided hike. Since it's a pretty long distance, Gran is planning on staying at our lodging with Hector to relax and enjoy the hot spring.

When we arrive at the ryokan that's run by Gran's relatives a short distance from the restaurant, there's nobody at the counter, just a bell. I guess it's because it isn't quite check-in time yet. The staff might be having a late lunch right now, too. As soon as I ring the bell, a golden retriever comes out from behind the curtain. She puts her big paws on the counter.

"Hey, Daizu! You're not supposed to be up there!" A woman says, before noticing us.

"Long time no see, Masa-chan."

Sawa-san greets his cousin Masae-san, also known as "Masa-chan." She has short hair, and she's wearing a dark red samue and a mustard yellow apron. She has a child-like face and cute freckles.

Daizu-chan has a cute, droopy mouth like western dog breeds often have, but she's even bigger than me. Hector is standing behind me with his fur on end, like he's scared and trying to be intimidating.

"What a big dog."

"Yeah, her breed is meant to hunt waterfowl. Since we're right next to Lake Nukabira, I take her out there, but she refuses to swim." She pets her dog, then says, "I've already prepared rooms for you." She shows Gran and Sakurako-san around while I let Hector and Daizu-chan meet.

Since the inn is pet friendly, Daizu-chan is used to meeting other dogs. Hector, on the other hand, is very tense around this big girl. Now's the time to use your perfect smile, Hector-san! Hector is

smart and friendly, so after he realizes that Daizu-chan is a gentle girl, they both start sniffing each other. After a few minutes, they're both happily chewing on the bones I gave them together.

Sawa-san finishes checking us in, then waits in the lobby for our guide to show up. I decide to explore in the meantime. The lobby has been renovated to be comfortable while still playing into the charm of the old building. There's a coffee maker, and several braziers for toasting snacks. The walls are lined with novels, manga, and picture books for guests to read.

"There's no convenience store nearby, so I'm worried I'll eat too much trying to avoid getting hungry later…" Sawa-san mutters as he places some locally made potato chips on the grill next to the brazier.

The scent of the oil cooking over the charcoal fire is irresistible. I get out of my seat because I know I shouldn't be snacking. I notice that there are antlers and skulls decorating the walls around the room. I get closer to the largest one. It's from a male. It has three pronged horns, so it must have been over 4 years old. It's big, so I think it was probably a bit older than that.

"That's a nice buck. Looking at the condition and size of the teeth, it was probably around 6 years old… Here, look at the lower jaw. They have chisel-like incisors for stripping bark off trees. Trees that they've damaged have beautifully clean marks from these teeth."

I've heard of deer damaging trees all over Hokkaido. Yezo deer will strip every piece of bark that they can reach, leaving the tree to die.

"Are they only on the bottom?"

"Yes, they are, so they leave bark fibers on the trunk. You can find out the age of a Yezo deer by looking at their lower jaw."

You can use the wear on the teeth to tell how old a deer is, just like with humans. I see something in the corner of my vision and turn around. Sawa-san is watching Sakurako-san and I.

"…Oh, is it time to leave?" I say with a panicked smile after noticing the young man, who seems to be the guide, standing with Sawa-san.

Somehow, I understand. Sawa-san has a lonely look in his eyes as he watches us, just like when we were at the village that disappeared.. It's not hard to tell what he's thinking. Watching me from behind must remind him of Soutarou-kun. If Soutarou-kun were still alive, would he listen to his intelligent older sister's excited tangents?

No, I guess he probably wouldn't. He was Sakurako-san's little brother, after all. By the time he was my age, he'd probably know far more than I do, and reply with "I already know that, you've told me a million times."

Just as a wizard needs an apprentice, or a great detective needs a slightly dumber assistant, Sakurako-san needs someone to teach about bones. I'm satisfactory for filling that role. And that's fine. Even if it seems like I'm just a replacement. Even if Sakurako-san also sees me that way. Because right now, the person standing beside her is undeniably me.

Our guide is an acquaintance of Sawa-san's who often works as a tour guide around Nukabira.

"My name is Tsuchiyama. Brown bears should be hibernating at this time of year, but lately young males occasionally don't go into hibernation, so please follow my instructions carefully. Depending on the time of year, they might come within a few meters hahaha," Tsuchiyama-san tells us an unsettling fact with a smile in place of a proper greeting.

At his advice, I change my shoes, put on a down jacket, and change into cold resistant pants.

"Even if there's no snow piled up, it's still winter," Tsuchiyama-san says. It's already past 1:00 pm.

Since the fieldwork we'll be doing is different from usual, we have to head to the Taushubetsu river bridge area in Tsuchiyama-san's car. He looks imposing with his sideburns and beard, like a bear. His cauliflower ears indicate he does judo. He seems reliable. Even Tsuchiyama-san can't fight a brown bear empty handed, though, so all we can do is hope we don't run into one.

With everyone in the car, we arrive at the entrance to a sealed off part of the forest after a few minutes. Tsuchiyama-san has to get out of the car to unlock the gate with his key before climbing back into the car.

“Only authorized vehicles are allowed past this point,” He says briefly.

The road is narrow at several points, and brown bears are commonly encountered in this area. That’s why you have to get permission or pay for a tour in order to come here. Still, there’s no end to the people who slip past the gate to walk to the bridge.

“I seriously wish they’d stop, their lives are at risk. Besides, Taushubetsu river bridge on Nukabira Lake is owned by a private power company. They only open it to the public as a courtesy because it’s a historic structure.”

Despite how it blends in with the landscape, Nukabira Lake is still from an artificial dam.

“If there’s any trouble, not only will you not be allowed to see it, but could get hurt or banned from visiting. Please follow the rules,” Tsuchiyama-san says with a big sigh.

He closes the gate, and starts leading us through the logging road toward the dam. I know it’s for our own safety, but I wish he would explain things to us like a regular tour guide.

The forest road along the railroad tracks is surrounded by thick greenery. I wish we’d come in summer when the plants are lush, rather than in the cold and lonely winter.

“Do you recommend coming here in summer?”

“It depends on the year. Sometimes the bridges are underwater in the summer. During winter, you can fish for pond smelt, and Yezo deer and white-tailed eagles often come close to people. Gasses that escape from the bottom of the lake get trapped under the ice, so you can see pretty bubbles under the surface. It’s cold as all get-out, though. Well, at least there’s no brown bears,” he laughs.

It must be scary to be in that much danger all the time. He points out the “beware of bears” sign next to where we parked the car. “Remember the scrape on it? That was from a bear. Crazy, isn’t it?”

I can’t help but laugh.

“There’s no need to worry so much. Just don’t get too close, and you’ll be fine. As long as you know their habits, it’s easy to prevent accidents. Brown bears are very intelligent, after all.” Sawa-san says, patting my shoulder.

In Ainu folklore, brown bears are considered to be gods of the mountains. They’re gods that are to be feared, loved, and cherished. I can understand why Sakurako-san wants the bones from one so badly.

I start to see the arch of the crumbling bridge poking out from the lake. Trains used to run across the concrete bridge, but now it seems like it could fall apart at any moment from the weight of the snow and water.

“I don’t know how many more times I’ll be able to see the beautiful circle the bridge draws on the lake’s surface. Maybe this will be the day it collapses and disappears forever,” Tsuchiyama-san says.

“Is there no way to preserve it?”

“Apparently it would cost 300 million yen to fix. Still, I’d like to at least preserve some of the other bridges, so I’ve been recruiting supporters and trying to earn donations. There’s nothing I can do about this dam, though. All I can do is wait for its end to come. There are some things that can only be preserved in a person’s memory.”

That’s just like life, I think. Sometimes you have to carry your memories with you, because nothing else remains. But time doesn’t stop. The clock keeps ticking.

“I know that it’s just how human history is, but it still makes me sad,” I say to Sakurako-san, but she has her back turned to the bridge. She’s happily picking up a dead mole-like creature and putting it in a plastic bag.

“…”

“What?” Sakurako-san replies with a pleased look after noticing I trailed off while staring at her.

For a moment I’m tempted to reproach her, but her smile wins me over. All I end up saying is “is that a mole?”

“No, it’s a shrew. It’s unfortunate that it’s missing its forelimbs, I don’t have a specimen of this species yet.”

She probably doesn’t find beauty in something so fragile and precious like a relic of history. She doesn’t seem to have a concept of feeling sentimental.

“Woah!” At that moment, a large bird loudly flaps its wings right above our heads.

“That’s a white-tailed eagle,” Sawa-san says with a whistle.

As I look up to the sky, I notice the silhouettes of other large birds circling overhead. It wasn’t just that one.

“…Somehow, it’s kind of scary seeing so many birds of prey in one spot.”

Black-tailed kites are common, but still imposing when seen up close, but seeing eagles and hawks flying so close to me makes me feel like my life is in danger. Their sharp beaks and talons make you instantly know they’re predators. Their huge wingspan reminds me of pterosaurs.

“Hm… That’s strange. I wonder what happened,” Sawa-san mutters to himself while looking up at the sky with me.

“They were pretty noisy when I was here this morning, too. There’s probably a deer carcass nearby,” Tsuchiyama-san says with a shrug.

Sakurako-san does a fist pump then starts walking away, as if to say “that’s my cue.”

Part 4

We came here planning to do fieldwork from the start. Even though this is technically according to plan, I’m pretty miffed about not getting to see much of Taushubetsu bridge.

“Don’t you already have a bunch of deer?” I grumble, a bit prickly.

“It might not be a deer. It could be a bear, or even a person.”

“I really hope it isn’t a person,” Sawa-san says with his face scrunched up.

“At this time of year, it wouldn’t be a bear. Maybe a deer or a fox, though. Not a day goes by that I don’t see a deer. Even in town,”

Tsuchiyama-san says, and suggests we look out the window of our inn rooms in the early morning.

"I hope it's a bird of prey. I'd love to make a specimen of one," Sakurako-san says as she excitedly continues down the forest path, clearly not listening to our conversation.

After a several minute walk from the car, the forest path connects to an animal trail where a group of eagles are gathered.

"Over there," Sawa-san says. Sakurako-san approaches it.

"Hey, it's dangerous!"

I instinctively try to pull her back. Even from this far away, I can smell blood. It's a new smell. Like death that hasn't started to decompose yet.

"…"

Foxes and crows watch the eagles eat, waiting for their turn. Sakurako-san waves her backpack around to scare them off as she moves forward. The birds and beasts screech in an attempt to ward off the ferocious beast approaching them, but Sakurako-san doesn't even flinch. They have no choice but to make a path for her, like Moses splitting the sea.

"…Ah." I almost forget to breathe.

"It's not a deer," Sakurako-san says with a shrug.

"It's not a- what?!" Sawa-san peeks through the bushes, but before he can speak, he notices the midnight blue denim. "A p-p…" He quickly steps back, bumping into Tsuchiyama-san, who is also trying to see what it is.

"W-what…" Tsuchiyama-san looks between Sawa-san and I, confused. "Huh?" Between my sad expression and Sawa-san's pale complexion, he must have some idea of what happened. "It… Couldn't be…"

"It sure is. It's a person. It's been eaten by animals, but it hasn't started rotting yet." Sakurako-san takes a fresh pair of gloves out of her pocket and snaps them against her wrist.

"Don't touch it. Utsumi-san and Aoba-san always tell you that you'll only hinder the investigation."

"It's already been chewed up. Surely there won't be any problems if I investigate a bit."

No problems, she says… The corpse in front of me is in a sad state. All the soft parts have been eaten away by birds. I want to pick up all the scattered pieces and make them whole again.

“They were still young… A woman.”

Based on her face and chest, I agree. Her clothes look like those a woman in her teens or early 20s would wear. She could even be the same age as me. Her fingernails are painted blue. The midnight blue denim is stained with blood, making it look more like indigo. They’re ripped in some spots, but it looks more like they were intentionally made that way than ripped by animals.

“She’s dressed lightly,” I mutter out loud without thinking.

“So you noticed.” Sakurako-san looks up at me and smiles while kneeling next to the corpse to investigate.

“Yeah. It’s not the kind of clothing you would wear at this time of year here.” At the very least, it’d be strange to have bare skin showing through the holes in her jeans.

“A thin jacket like this would be fine in Asahikawa, but it’s too cold here already. Advanced hypothermia can cause a phenomenon called ‘paradoxical undressing’ where the body thinks it’s too hot, so the person takes off their clothes. It doesn’t appear that this woman took off any of her clothes, indicating she came here dressed lightly from the start.”

“Could it have been a bear?” Tsuchiyama-san asks, sounding dazed. He’s fallen into a seat on the ground.

“No, from what I can see, there’s no indication of that. There wasn’t much bleeding, so I think it was only damaged by animals after death. There’s no cable marks on the neck, and the eyes haven’t hemorrhaged, so it doesn’t look like strangulation either.”

“So there’s a possibility she committed suicide, died of an illness, or froze to death. Maybe she came here dressed lightly because she didn’t know better, then got lost…”

“Came here for what? To see a broken bridge?”

“A lot of people are touched by that broken bridge, you know.”

While we’re talking, I notice Sawa-san and Tsuchiyama-san are staring at Sakurako-san and I— or rather, just me. They seem surprised.

“Um… Well, it’s not in very good condition, but you often do autopsies on animals, right Sawa-san? Would you be okay looking at a human?”

“Well, err… I guess you could say I don’t really feel the same way about humans and animals…”

I personally feel that humans and animals are of the same life. I don’t feel a big difference in how reluctant I am toward them. Maybe that’s just because of how I’ve changed after all this time.

“So… We can’t just leave things like this, but I can’t contact the police.”

It looks like the cell service is weak here. We have no choice but to split up into two groups: one to report the body, and one to protect it from animals. After a round of rock-paper-scissors, Tsuchiyama-san and I are chosen to stay with the corpse. Sakurako-san and Sawa-san take the car, while I cover the body with a blue, plastic sheet that Tsuchiyama-san keeps in his car while occasionally shooing away nearby animals.

It only took them 10 minutes to come back, but it felt like far too long when I’m scared of all the animals gathering around and Tsuchiyama-san is shaking in fear from the corpse. After Sakurako-san and Sawa-san return, the police soon follow, and the rest is the typical routine. I told Sakurako-san to stay quiet, but of course she didn’t, so the police got suspicious of her. To clear her name, I call Utsumi-san and that strange, tanuki-like detective we met in Touma-cho and Sounkyo. Thanks to their approval (?), we managed to return to the inn at around 5pm.

Naturally, Gran is furious. She makes not just Sakurako-san, but Sawa-san as well, kneel on the ground while she lectures them. It’s only times like these when Gran treats me like a child. She says children shouldn’t have to see dead bodies. I’m not a little kid who’s afraid of corpses anymore, though. Lately when Azechi shows me gorey horror movies, I can only see them cynically. All I can think about is how the blood wouldn’t splurt out that colour, or something.

Fortunately, the lecture doesn’t drag on for too long. Hector frantically licks Gran, like he’s saying, “please stop! Please don’t be mad!” It’s almost time for dinner, so we head to the baths.

Sawaya Inn used to be a large inn with a lot of rooms, but since being remodeled, they merged many of the rooms to have just a few larger rooms. It has a nice, welcoming atmosphere. The facilities are a bit old, and you can hear a lot of noise from the rooms when you're in the hallways, but… The important parts are clean and modern. There are many other features set up so the guests don't get bored, so it's overall a very comfortable place to stay.

Nukabira used to be famous for being haunted, but since there aren't many tourists, it's nice and quiet. Like a hidden gem. There aren't a lot of places like this where you can relax in a quiet hot spring. The water in the hot spring is a little too hot for me, but it's silky and feels nice. It's easy to see why this place was known for being good for your skin.

"Y'know, this place actually has a mixed outdoor bath…" Sawa-san says with a grin as he stretches out in the bath.

"What?!"

A mixed bath… It sounds like it should be forbidden.

"Sawa-san… Have you ever been in it?"

"Of course. But, well, young women don't usually use it…"

Ah, that… Makes sense…

"…Are you disappointed?"

"No… That would mean other people would see me, too. I don't think I have the confidence for that…"

"…Wanna go check it out?"

"No, thanks."

There's no way Sakurako-san would ever go into a mixed bath. Gran wouldn't let her, either. Besides, I love seeing Sakurako-san just after she gets out of the bath. Her pale skin is slightly pink, and the hair dryer blows the scent of shampoo around. After getting out of the bath, I dry Sakurako-san's hair for her while we wait for dinner to be ready. Sawa-san is grinning at me while he pets Hector, but I ignore him. Gran is next to me, braiding Sakurako-san's hair. Seeing Sakurako-san wearing a yukata with two braids in her hair gives the room a retro atmosphere.

Just like lunch, dinner has a "locally sourced" theme, so it's made with locally raised vegetables and meat. Hokkaido is a big

place, so it takes a long time to travel around it. It's supposed to be a sign of good hospitality to serve crab and sashimi, even if you're up in the mountains. I'm mostly just interested in eating the most delicious foods they have to offer, and tonight's dinner didn't disappoint.

Sakurako-san happily devours four servings worth of corn mousse. Gran smiles, saying that there's no stopping her. She's being unusually lenient today.

Although we're a strange, motley group, we all have the common goal of making Gran happy. Well, Sakurako-san mostly does whatever she wants to, but Sawa-san and I are making an effort to make Gran's day special. Sakurako-san borrowed an extra blanket for Gran, so she wouldn't be cold after getting out of the bath.

Gran is a servant. They aren't related by blood, but they do say that "blood is thicker than water." I wonder if I could ever be special to Sakurako-san like she is. Soon, I'll be going to university, and possibly leaving Asahikawa, but I'm still unsure about my future. He hasn't said anything to me personally, but I'm sure that Isozaki-sensei can tell that I still don't know what school I want to go to. I'm worried about it. It's not something I can tell my Grandpas, my Grandma, or my mom.

If Sakurako-san isn't there, I don't know what I'll do. I don't want to be away from her. I'm fine with it for now, but if I leave Asahikawa, our relationship will definitely change. Our current relationship is vague. There's no backbone supporting it. That's why I'm scared. But is it really okay to narrow down my future career because of those feelings?

"…What's wrong? If you'd spoken up, I would have saved you one."

I suddenly realize that I zoned out while staring at Sakurako-san's empty dishes.

"No, it's not that… I was just thinking that Hector might be upset that we were away all day." I make up an excuse on the spot.

"You might be right," Sakurako-san says.

“He was playing with Daizu-chan in the lobby after they had dinner. Apparently they went on a walk together during the day, too. I hear he’s totally smitten with Daizu-chan,” Sawa-san laughs.

It sounds like the start of a heartwarming love story. Even though tonight is the only night they’ll ever spend together. I know that feeling all too well. I hate it.

Part 5

After dinner, we watch the gold and white fluff balls play while sitting around a brazier. Sakurako-san is being unusually talkative, since she had some alcohol with her meal. She’s talking about the bones in the room with Sawa-san, much to Gran’s dismay. Masa-chan walks over to us, carrying a 1seg TV.

“Look, it made the news~!”

There’s a news story about the corpse we found earlier. Based on her belongings, they believe she was a 22 year old woman from Obihiro city. She had a suicide note, so the police are investigating it under the possibility of either a suicide or an accident.

“Isn’t there a pretty low chance that it wasn’t suicide?” I mutter. Sakurako-san scoffs.

“I hope it doesn’t become a popular suicide spot….” Masa-chan says anxiously.

Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head with narrowed eyes. “It doesn’t matter if they say it was actually suicide or not. Some medical examiners report that up to 90% of supposed suicides are actually homicides. You can’t trust a suicide note.”

“Then… You think it was murder?” I ask. Gran glares at Sakurako-san and I disapprovingly.

“Oh, but even though the bears are hibernating and you had a guide with you, it must have been scary staying outside with a dead body for several minutes, right? You’re so brave,” Masa-chan praises me, probably in an attempt to change the subject.

“Well… There were hawks and stuff crowding around it. Part of me would kind of like to see a brown bear once in my life, though.” I can’t really just come out and say that I’m not afraid of corpses anymore, so I just go along with it.

“Aah!” Sakurako-san suddenly shouts. “I want a carcass of one! The only complete brown bear specimen I have is a cub. I want an adult ! I can’t believe I don’t have a full, adult brown bear skeleton even though I live in Hokkaido! Even though I have an Asian black bear!” Sakurako-san writhes with incomprehensible frustration.

Apparently she was given the black bear by an acquaintance.

“I heard about it from Nii-chan and Granny Ume, but you really do collect bones! Well, I suppose hunters make models like that, too. We have a deer as a decoration, too!” Masa-chan says, sounding surprised.

“Brown bear skeletons have a lot of academic value, though. It’s the largest mammal that lives in Japan, right? Anyone would definitely want to hold the bones of one, and examine each little detail!”

“R-really?” Masa-san looks at Sawa-san.

“Yeah, well, I can’t deny it,” he says with a nod.

Now that I take a step back and really think about it, if someone asked me if I wanted to see a bear skeleton, I’d probably say yes.

“I see. Hmm… bones from a brown bear… Well, I know where to find some, but…”

Sakurako-san’s entire body is screaming “I want it so bad” so the point where Masa-chan looks troubled due to feeling bad for Sakurako-san. Masa-chan tilts her head to the side.

“What?! Really?! But it isn’t on display!”

“Well, I guess you could say it’s not out because it has a bit of a history…” Masa-chan then says she still has work to do, and calls for the senior proprietress instead.

Upon hearing that we want the bear skeleton, the proprietress wears the exact same expression Masa-san had, and gives a troubled groan. Gran has a grim expression.

“The bear bones… Well, honestly they’re too much for us to take care of, so I don’t mind if you take them, but… They’re the bones from the ‘man eating bear,’” The proprietress says with a bitter smile.

“Ah,” Gran says as if she’s realized something. She scowls even more. “Young miss… You shouldn’t take them,” Gran says

gently.

“What do you mean? Is it some kind of occult thing?”

“It’s… not the occult,” the senior proprietress says, resigning herself to pulling over a chair. Hector and Daizu-chan both put their heads on her lap. She pets them with both of her hands as she begins her story. “These bones… Belonged to a bear who ate a bride who came here to be wed a long time ago.”

Back when the town was full of people, Sawaya was a large inn that was quite popular. During that time, however, the management became corrupt. The previous owner was the current senior proprietress’ uncle, but he stepped down due to financial difficulties.

“My Grandfather had good business sense, but his son, my uncle, was quite profligate. Everyone was worried about what would happen when he took over.”

Then one day, her Grandfather fell seriously ill. Her uncle had a fiancée that was two years younger than him. She was the daughter of a merchant family, and his childhood friend.

“Fusako-san… Was meek, but she had a tough body and a strong will. Most importantly, she was good with numbers like her father. I think my Grandfather relied on Fusako-san more than his own son. That’s why it was decided that their marriage would be hastened.”

At the time, her uncle was 18 years old, and Fusako-san was 15. The original plan was to wait until she was 18, but they suddenly decided to have them wed as soon as she turned 16. For as long as they could remember, the uncle and Fusako-san had grown up like siblings. The two of them were close, with the uncle in particular charmed by Fusako-san, who was maturing into quite a beautiful young woman.

“Fusako-san felt fond toward him as well, of course,” the senior proprietress says. “…But Fusako-san had someone else she loved.”

The two dogs whine at the proprietress, as if they’re worried about her seeming sad.

“He was a hunter who was almost 10 years older than Fusako-san. He was an eccentric misanthrope, but Fusako-san and my

uncle idolized him like an older brother."

Gradually, Fusako-san started to favour the hunter over her fiancé/childhood friend. Nobody was sure if he realized her feelings, or if he returned them. Around the time they set a date for their wedding, the hunter moved from the city into the mountains.

"At one point, Fusako-san refused to get married, but once she learned that the hunter was moving to the mountains, she agreed to go through with it. I think her father or Grandfather forced him to move."

And so, Fusako-san became the proprietress-to-be of Sawaya Inn. The Grandmother adored Fusako-san even more than her own daughter, and business improved. The relationship between Fusako-san and the uncle didn't seem too bad, but even 3 years after the Grandfather passed away, she still hadn't given birth to an heir.

"Of course, I'm not sure of the exact reason she wasn't having a baby. Children are supposed to be a gift, you know? But my uncle was spending a lot of money, forced Fusako-san to take care of the inn, and was hanging around with other women."

A devoted wife, and a prodigal husband.

"I think he just wanted to be loved," the senior proprietress says sadly.

I don't mean to justify his affair, but I can definitely see how a rift would form between those two. He yearned for his childhood friend, and married her, but she loved someone else. I wonder if they ever spoke about it. I can't hold back my tears anymore when I think about how the uncle must have felt.

"But Fusako-san worked hard, and she never uttered a single complaint. One day, my uncle found out that the hunter had dropped off a deer that he shot while hunting for a bear. He was furious."

Fusako-san didn't even get to see the hunter in person. Even though she had never betrayed her husband, he beat her until she bled. His anger stemmed from love, but it burned so hot that nothing she said would calm him down. Fusako-san ended up running away. Apparently everyone else had to desperately stop the uncle from chasing her. They managed to stop him, but he was ranting that he

was going to kill her. A bear had been seen nearby that day, so everyone was on high alert.

As soon as dawn broke, the hunter appeared at the inn. He was carrying a disemboweled bear on his back, and also…

“He found a woman’s left wrist in the bear’s stomach. There was a mole at the base of the thumb that was still attached, just like Fusako-san’s…”

After that night, Fusako-san never returned home. Nobody knows if she was trying to get to the hunter’s house, or if she was just attacked while wandering in the night.

“This is all I could find,” the hunter sadly announced.

After that, he left town. In an attempt to find her remains, everyone searched the mountains. They killed another bear, but in the end, they never found her body.

“After losing Fusako-san, my uncle seemed to have lost a piece of his soul… The inn fell into a decline… Maybe it’s just because Fusako-san was the one keeping the business afloat. Maybe she became Kim-un-kamuy’s bride,” the senior proprietress says.

Rather than serving us tea cakes, she grills oyaki with pumpkin paste for us.

“Kim-un-kamuy? Like the bear god?” I ask after accepting some oyaki .

Kim-un-kamuy is a god in Ainu folklore. It’s a brown bear, and is considered the god of the mountains.

“Yes. Basically, bears that attack people are said to be evil gods, but it’s different if they attack a young woman. The woman is said to have been taken as Kim-un-kamuy’s bride. The woman’s family is supposed to be protected by Kim-un-kamuy, and will prosper.”

Regardless of if the legend is true or not, for some reason the uncle decided to take the bear and collect its skeleton.

“That bear killed Fusako-san. As a child, I always thought that it was wrong to keep the skeleton around, but… Maybe this bear is the only connection I have left to her. So? What do you think?” the senior proprietress asks Sakurako-san. “We don’t really believe in those stories, but it still doesn’t feel right to display them or throw them

away, so they've been sitting in storage for ages. If you're okay with it, I don't mind giving them to you."

"Absolutely not! There's no way you're taking it home!" Gran shouts.

"Why?! They don't need them here, and I'll take good care-"

"No means no! Absolutely not!" Gran says in abject refusal. She makes an X with her arms.

Next to her, Sakurako-san has a deeply furrowed brow. "Why? Because the bear killed that Fusako woman? Then let me tell you something. Fusako wasn't really killed by a bear," Sakurako-san says bluntly.

"Huh?" Everyone's gazes gather on Sakurako-san.

"Don't you find it strange? After several days of searching the mountain, they couldn't find a single other piece of her corpse? Only a single wrist? They went to a mountain with bears, so there must have been other hunters around, too, right?"

"Huh? Yes, from what I've heard, all the hunters from the area were there, not just the one that Fusako-san liked…"

"What's strange about that?" I ask on behalf of the perplexed proprietress.

Sakurako-san splits a piping hot oyaki in half, then calls out to Sawa-san. He sounds a bit sleepy when he replies, perhaps due to the combination of fatigue and alcohol.

"Hm?"

"Let me ask you something. Take a pumpkin, for example. If a brown bear ate a whole pumpkin, what would happen to its feces?" Sakurako-san asks as she takes a bite out of one half of her oyaki .

Sawa-san groans in disgust. "…Well, it'd come out like pumpkin paste."

"Pft!"

Hearing that at the same time I'm enjoying the gentle sweetness of oyaki , I can't help but want to spit it out. Gran does, too.

"It's said that since the Meiji era, Hokkaido brown bears have switched from being carnivorous to omnivorous. However, brown bears have a digestive system adapted around eating meat.

Therefore they digest meat very well, but struggle to digest other things," Sawa-san explains while glancing at Gran and I apologetically.

"That's right. That's why brown bear feces often retain the shape of indigestible things they ate. Even if they can digest meat well, large bones, hair, and clothing won't be digested. If that bear truly ate that woman, there would be remains of her in its feces."

If Fusako-san had really been eaten by a bear, hunters searching for several days would have found some remnant of her, Sakurako-san concludes.

"Japan's worst animal attack was the Sankebetsu Brown Bear incident with 7 victims. When the feces and stomach contents of the bear were examined, they found hair and clothes from the victims. However in this case, the hunter said the only thing he found was one of the woman's wrists."

"But that wrist must have belonged to Fusako-san, right?"

"Sure, but losing your hand doesn't necessarily mean you'll die."

"Huh…?"

Sakurako-san smiles as she takes a big bite of oyaki , and takes her time chewing it before swallowing.

"Boy. You have a relative in Kamishihoro that's a hunter. You should ask him next time you see him if he knew a hunter whose wife was missing her left hand."

"Ah…" Now that she's mentioned that, I suddenly understand what Sakurako-san is talking about.

"Huh? Then Fusako-san…" The senior proprietress' eyes are wide open with surprise.

"When a person dies, traces are left behind. That's still true, even if they were eaten by an animal. If no traces were left behind, then one could assume the person in question is still alive."

She was a strong woman who gave up on her love to marry her childhood friend, and protected this inn. Did she feel guilty because her husband had changed? Or maybe she felt pity, or a different kind of love? Even though the man she knew since childhood beat her, she couldn't bring herself to hate him, but she still wanted to be with

the person she truly loved. Maybe she cut off her hand so she could be free.

“In exchange for her left hand, she got to be free. It’s possible that she did it so that she didn’t hurt her husband’s pride. He must have realized that, and that’s why he kept those bones as a keepsake.”

It could be that she wanted the bear’s remains to protect her husband and the inn in her stead. Or maybe she wanted her husband to be brave like a bear and protect the inn himself.

“How’s that? Do you still think it’s a ferocious, man-eating bear, Ume?” Sakurako-san says with a grin.

“Maybe not, but…” Gran mumbles so quietly that it’s hard to make out her words.

“Then there’s no problem.”

Sakurako-san turns away from Gran and holds her hand out to the senior proprietress. She never changes… However, the senior proprietress furrows her brow and says, “well this is troublesome.”

“…What is?”

“If that’s true, we’re in big trouble.”

“Wh…?! Why?! What’s the problem?!” Sakurako-san cries desperately.

She almost knocks the brazier over in her anguish. Everyone panics for a moment and yells at her. Seeing Sakurako-san acting like that, the senior proprietress can’t help but laugh.

“After all, wouldn’t that mean you’d be taking away the inn’s guardian?”

“Ngh…”

She has a point. The inn has overcome a lot of hardships, and is finally starting to bounce back, so now would be the worst possible time to take away their guardian. Sakurako-san groans with despair. The senior proprietress starts to laugh again.

“I was just kidding. I don’t think all of our hard work, and trial and error meant nothing because of some bear bones. We’re doing well thanks to our own effort.” She adds that the bones are at the back of the storehouse, so she’ll call Sakurako-san once she finds them.

She said she'd send them by mail, but Sakurako-san insists on picking them up in person so they don't get damaged.

Later in the evening, I head back to the room first since Sawa-san wanted to have a long bath. I run into Sakurako-san, alone in the hallway.

"I'm glad you got a bear," I say. She smiles.

"But I was surprised to hear she cut off her own hand… Maybe we should look into that hunter."

"There's no need."

"…Huh?"

"I said there's no need to look into him." She slowly shakes her head, still smiling.

"Hm? But… Aren't you curious…?"

Sakurako-san leans in close to my ear. Her skin is still warm from the bath, and she smells like soap.

"It's fine. It was all just a guess. There's always a chance that they simply didn't find the body. Bears also like to hide their food to eat later, and there's no definitive proof that the wrist even belonged to that woman."

"What?! But- Then-"

"Don't worry about it. Dead men tell no tales, after all. They have more bones than they can use, too. If the bones happen to end up in the possession of someone who wants them, like me, then what's the harm? The case is over now."

"Then.. You said all that just so you could have the bones?!"

"Not exactly, boy. I simply suggested a hypothetical situation in which that woman might still be alive. I've told you before, haven't I? 'Truth' is a vague concept. There are as many truths as there are people," Sakurako-san says shamelessly with a devilish grin.

I know everything she said was made of guesses and assumptions, but she's still pretty persuasive. Was it really all a complete lie? But…

"Doesn't it give you a bad feeling to close the case without investigating every avenue?"

"I'm satisfied with leaving it as it is. All I care about is the skeleton. Just drop it, okay? Don't bring it up again."

“But…”

But what about me?

“I was to listen to the voices of the dead properly. I don’t want to miss a single whisper from them. I know you think that corpses are mere objects, but I think that there’s still life left in a person even after they’ve gone cold,” I say as Sakurako-san starts to walk away from me. She’s starting to untie her hair, since she had it up to keep it out of the bath.

Maybe I’m just a child throwing a tantrum because I can’t accept her point of view, but that’s why I won’t become a skeletal specimen collector. I’m not trying to follow after her. I’ve decided not to plan my future while hiding behind her.

“I’m going to work hard to become a forensic scientist. I may not be like Professor Shitara, but I want to listen to the voices of the dead.”

Sakurako-san suddenly stops walking away.

“Well… I’ll have to work really hard to improve my grades, but I’ve already discussed it with Isozaki-sensei and made my decision.”

She remains silent with her back still turned to me. It was Sakurako-san that gave me the motive to take this path in the first place. That day when we went on our first “adventure” together, when I touched human bones for the first time in my life, and when I saw Kiyomi-san’s corpse in her apartment… I’m sure that’s when my path opened before me. The anger on that hot summer’s day when we found the corpse of Ii-chan’s mother. The heat of Kougami’s tears streaming down her face when she lost her Grandmother. Piece by piece, those moments have become the road I walk.

“…I see. So you’re not going to become a preparator, after all…” Sakurako-san says softly as she looks over her shoulder at me.

I’ve never seen her wear this expression before, so lonely… No, that’s not true. I’ve seen this before. She looked at me with this same expression under the cherry blossoms.

“Oh, but of course I can still help you with making specimens! I’ll help with fieldwork, too, as long as I have the time! Lately making

specimens has kind of become my hobby, too—“ I hurriedly try to add, but she looks so, so lonely as I speak.

Suddenly, she reaches out her hand toward the base of my neck. Her hand is warm. In the same moment I’m surprised by the heat, I find myself wrapped in her arms.

“S-Sakurako-sa—…?!”

“I’ll support you.”

In contrast to me calling out her name in a selfish, pathetic voice, she speaks incredibly calmly. Brief. Kind. She gives me a gentle, yet firm and encouraging, pat on the back of my head with her broad hands before releasing me from her arms. I wonder when I grew to be so much taller than Sakurako-san.

As we separate from one another, the smile returns to her face. I feel relieved, but also like something has broken. I can feel her anxiety in the warmth remaining on my skin. I’m afraid of it cooling off. Even though we were just hugging, the moment she starts to walk away again she feels so far away. I return to my room alone, feeling isolated.

Final part

Sawa-san returns to our room in a good mood with a beer in one hand, and invites me to go to the open air bath again. I follow him, half out of desperation, but as soon as we approach the changing room, we realize there’s a young couple already heading into the bath. We return to our room in silence, feeling a little bit defeated.

“Man, we should’ve just barged in there and had a nice, long soak to make things awkward for them…”

“I think that would’ve been too awkward for me to take.”

After listening to an unruly Sawa-san talk about why humans don’t have a mating season like other animals for nearly an hour, he goes to bed. I wish Hector was here, at least. He fell asleep on Sakurako-san’s bed after playing with his beloved Daizu-chan all day. I hope I’m reborn as a dog in my next life.

As I’m laying in my futon, before falling asleep, countless thoughts swirl around in my head. No, it’s really just one thought.

Sakurako-san's lonely expression. It's burned into the back of my eyelids. Even if I were to become a preparator, though, I don't think I'd be able to stay by her side forever. Besides, she's probably going to marry Ariwara-san in the near future. When that happens, I don't think our relationship will be able to stay the way it is now.

"…Now that I think about it, why haven't Sakurako-san and Ariwara-san gotten married yet?"

They promised to marry each other when they were very young, and they're close with each other. Considering their ages, it's surprising that they haven't formally gotten married yet. I figured it was because of Ariwara-san's job, but I can't really think of a reason that would prevent them from marrying. There must be some obstacle between them that I can't see.

"…" Sawa-san replies to my muttering with a deep sigh, and uncomfortably rolls over in his bed.

"…So there is a reason?"

"Well… yeah. I guess there is, but…"

I'm perplexed by his vague answer.

"Well… I think people have things they want to lose just as much as they have things they want to protect."

"Things they want to lose, huh?"

"Yeah."

Sawa-san seems to be thinking for a while, taking deep breaths. "Don't tell Granny Ume about this, okay?" He reminds me. "I think… They might be waiting for Granny Ume to die first."

"What?!" I almost jump out of my bed. Sawa-san puts his finger to his mouth and shushes me. "No, wait… Why?!" I ask, desperately trying to keep my voice down.

The look on Sawa-san's face says, "this is why I didn't want to tell you."

"But… Doesn't Gran want to see Sakurako-san in a wedding dress more than anything?! She loves the Kujou family so much-"

"That's why. We all know how Gran feels, but she wants to end the 'Kujou family' with her generation. She'll probably sell the house once Gran dies."

"But…"

I heard before that Ariwara-san was going to be adopted as a son-in-law and take the Kujou name Gran also mentioned before that the Kujou family will be safe, as long as Ariwara-san takes over. Gran actually seems quite proud that he'll be joining the family.

"Then why-"

"There's no helping it. There's more than just bones sleeping in the garden, and the good memories aren't enough to drown it out. There are many, many painful memories out there. To her, all of those things are what makes up the 'Kujou family,'"

"…"

Gran is like a guardian deity for the Kujou family. It would be hard for Sakurako-san to throw it all away right in front of her. Sakurako-san intends to abandon everything related to the Kujou name, and join the Ariwara family. She's worried about how Gran will react, so she's waiting until Gran has passed away. Just like when Fusako-san cut off her wrist and had it sent to her husband. It's a cruel choice made by her heart of steel. But just because it's made of steel doesn't mean her heart doesn't bleed.

Ariwara-san understands Sakurako-san's feelings well. They must have discussed this already. Those two already have such a close bond that they don't need to be bound by the law. Even without being legally married, I know Sakurako-san would never be attracted to someone else. I understand that better than anyone.

"Of course, she still wants Granny Ume to live a long and healthy life. Who knows, maybe things will change in the future and they can get married without upsetting her." Sawa-san tries to comfort me, so I have to pretend like my mind hasn't been shattered into a million pieces.

I can't believe that the person who loves Sakurako-san the most, and wants to see her in a wedding gown more than anyone, will never have the chance to see her on her special day. Everything is spinning in my head. Sakurako-san, Ariwara-san, and poor Gran.It's hard to breathe.

I had a dream tonight. I dreamt that I was a violent bear god, but even in my dream, I couldn't catch Sakurako-san to take her as

my bride.

Second bone: Kunnerekkamuy Sings in Nightmares

Part 1

Even though I'm scared of Hanabusa, and I sometimes find dead bodies, my everyday life hasn't changed much. Both of those things are considered "unusual," though. Still, despite being caught in Hanabusa's spiderweb, nothing has actually changed in my day to day life. And so, my regular life continues as it always has.

The days are getting colder as the "real winter" approaches. After getting home from Nukabira, I felt strangely worked up, but I still went back to my regular life. This has been repeating for the past year. Exactly one year ago, I first saw a diantha treebrown butterfly fly away from a corpse.

I've been watching the temperature drop day by day, and finally on Monday, we get our first snow. It's a little bit later than usual. After parting with Imai so he can go to his club, Azechi and Kougami invite me to go to karaoke with them. I decline, and instead go to the coffee stand in front of the station. I like to go there because there are lots of other people around, it's an open space, and there are security cameras. In other words, I don't trust the person I'm meeting with. This person is someone who I don't want to have invading my regular coffee shop - Aoba-san.

Even though Sakurako-san fully trusts him, and he's professor Shitara's right hand man, I just can't bring myself to trust that autopsy technician. He seems off, somehow, like he doesn't belong with the Kujou family. The same could be said for me, though, which makes me even more anxious about him. Maybe I'm just jealous because Sakurako-san refuses to doubt him, even a little bit. Either way, I don't trust him, and he has given me no reason to. He has this air of mystery around him. However, he's someone that I want to trust, so when I heard he was doing something in the area, I invited him for coffee.

I order a hot cafe latte, and wrap my hands around the cup in hopes that the warmth will ease my nerves. Soon enough, a familiar man wearing glasses enters the store. I lean away from the people between us and hold up my hand a bit to show him where I am. He notices me and waves hello. He's smiling, but his eyes are bloodshot from driving for 2 hours. I heard he was on his way to his parents' house in Nayoro.

"Sorry for interrupting you on your way home," I bow my head as he sits down next to me.

"Even though I'm going home, I won't really be relaxing there. I'm going there to mourn for my late father. They held a memorial for the 33rd anniversary two weeks ago, but I couldn't attend due to work, so I figured I should at least try to visit this time," he adds with a forced smile that his mother would complain if he didn't visit.

He shrugs, and says that his visit is more for his elderly mother than for his late father. "There's a lecture waiting for me when I get home, so I'd be happy to have some tea and relax a bit before I get there."

Aoba-san smiles and says he was actually glad I invited him here. I honestly don't know if I should be thankful he's being so considerate of me, or if I should be even more suspicious.

"So, the reason I invited you here…"

"Is it about the corpse from Nukabira? Or about university?"

"Ah… Um, the corpse one."

"I was surprised. I can't believe the two of you found that body," Aoba-san says with a loud laugh.

It was actually Aoba-san that contacted me first. He happened to have the day off, but the university he works at was involved in the autopsy on the woman's corpse we discovered in Nukabira. The police mentioned it was Professor Shitara's niece that found the body… Aoba-san was shocked, and contacted me because he was concerned about if I was there as well.

"I saw in the newspaper this morning that the woman was from Obihiro."

"She still had all her belongings, and she sent a suicide note via email to several people, so the police have concluded that there

was no foul play," Aoba-san says, blowing away the white steam rising from his coffee before taking a sip.

Halloween has passed, and the interior of the store is in full Christmas Mode. It feels like winter already.

"Sakurako-san says you can't trust a suicide note, though."

"…" He forces a smile and looks away.

"…Is that really true?"

"Well… It's not *untrue* , which makes it even more frustrating."

He prefaces by saying that he doesn't mean to criticise the police. He doesn't hate the police, or anything like that. Aoba-san actually feels a sense of camaraderie with the police. He appreciates that the police respect forensic scientists that they work with. However, he isn't completely happy with the structure of the Japanese judicial system.

"Um… What do you think, Aoba-san? Do you… think it was suicide?" I ask nervously, looking at my mug.

He lets out a short sigh.

"At the very least… We have no reason to suspect murder. She died of cardiac arrest due to hypothermia. Basically, she froze to death. She might have been wandering around, looking for a place to die, and collapsed there."

The estimated time of death is between 3 and 5 in the morning of the day we found her. It's always coldest in the early morning.

"Wasn't she dressed way too lightly to be wandering around? She looked like she wasn't prepared for the cold at all," I ask.

Aoba-san nods. "There are many people who go into the mountains or forest without preparing."

"I know, but…"

Every year, I hear at least one story of someone going into the wilderness without dressing for the weather and never returning home.

"Maybe she saw Taushubetsu on the news and wanted to go see it, or she had memories of going there and decided to visit on impulse."

"Well… The bridge is really beautiful, but still…"

"Even if it was suicide, it would still make sense…"

Aoba-san was listing all kinds of explanations before, but now he has gone silent.

"…Aoba-san?"

"…"

"Do you mean… You still aren't convinced?"

He remains silent for a while, watching the steam rise from his cup. I'm confused and anxious about his sudden silence, so I frantically search his face for any clue to what he's thinking. Maybe this is all an act? My doubts suddenly vanish when he lets out a big sigh.

"We found… beta blockers in her body."

"What? Beta… What is that?"

"Beta blockers. Do you know what an anti-hypertensive agent is?"

"So it's medicine to lower your blood pressure? Can young people… Have high blood pressure?"

My mom has been struggling with high blood pressure lately, but this woman was only in her 20s.

"Young people are less likely to see symptoms since their blood vessels are stronger, but that doesn't mean it can't happen. I checked her medical records, but there were no symptoms of hypertension, and she wasn't given any treatment for it."

"You'd… Need a prescription to get it, wouldn't you?"

I'm not completely sure, since it's not a drug that I normally think about, but I can't say I've ever seen over the counter blood pressure medicine.

"I'd like to say you're right, but… Blood pressure medicine is often marketed for other uses, too. It's still considered a class 1 drug, though," Aoba-san says. (TL NOTE: Class 1 in Japan means it's a medication dispensed by a pharmacist. It is not the same as the US term "schedule 1" for addictive, non-medical drugs.)

"Huh? What other uses?"

He adds that it's well known, and commonly sold over the counter at drug stores. "It's not intended to be ingested, and they actually make it taste bad, so I can't imagine she would ingest it by accident…

“So you’re saying that she took it to kill herself, or someone else forced her to take it then killed it?”

“No! No! That’s not what I meant. It’s possible that the drug hastened her death, but her cause of death was definitely hypothermia. She hadn’t taken a lethal dose.”

Aoba-san sets his coffee cup down a bit haphazardly and leans in.

“Since she didn’t take a lethal dose, it begs the question… Why did she take anti-hypertensive medicine before she died?”

“Maybe… The taste was too gross, so she couldn’t finish taking the lethal dose. Sakurako-san always says that it’s harder than you’d think to take a lethal dose of anything.”

“Even if that were the case… I think it would be more painful to freeze to death than to drink some gross medicine.”

He even considered how difficult the ‘suicide’ would be. It’s useful to consider, even if the cause of death is clearly engraved on the body, such as hanging. From there, one can consider the method and the deceased’s psychology. However, in a case like this where all of those things are unclear, it’s difficult for even the police and forensic scientists to find answers.

“If only we could find the medicine container, we could know how much she took and when she intended to take it.”

Unfortunately, they never found it.

“I wonder why…”

“The other thing that’s been bothering me is that we found alcohol in her system,” he mumbles into his black coffee.

Alcohol isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it’s concerning to hear that the deceased had been drinking.

“Could someone else have gotten her drunk and tried to force her to take the medicine?”

“It’s not impossible, but it didn’t seem to be enough to get her drunk enough for that.”

“So you mean the alcohol had nothing to do with her death?”

“She could have had a drink to help bear with the cold… Or perhaps she drank it along with the beta blockers.”

“You think she took the medicine on purpose…? Is it bad to take it with alcohol?” I’ve heard that you generally shouldn’t mix medicine with alcohol.

“It’s a nightmare.” Aoba-san mutters quietly. He gently strokes the side of his cup with his thumb.

“A nightmare… You mean that it’s painful, or…?”

“No, it’s not a metaphor. She really would have had nightmares. Drinking alcohol after taking beta blockers isn’t life threatening in small doses. The blood pressure in the human brain drops during REM sleep, though, which causes nightmares and trauma to be unearthed.”

“Then she went out of her way to take a non-lethal dose of a medicine that’s hard to stomach, then drank alcohol with it just so she’d have nightmares while she died?”

I don’t know how much she knew about the effects, but by the time she decided to take the drug, she must have had some knowledge about it. While it’s normal for people to wander around while looking for a place to die, it’s unusual for a suicidal person to voluntarily give themself nightmares while they die…

“It’s just… It doesn’t seem like the incident has come together nicely.”

“You’re right… But there’s no clear reason to suspect foul play. There was a suicide note, and the woman’s family is convinced it was a suicide. ‘I always knew this day would come. I’ve been prepared for it,’ they said.”

“So the incident won’t be investigated?”

Aoba-san slowly, silently shakes his head. He sighs, and mutters that the police have already concluded that it was a suicide.

“But… This kind of thing happens. She was given a proper autopsy, so I think it’s fine.”

It’s fine… He must have said that because she was one of the ones who got an autopsy. Under Japanese law, many corpses are cremated without any analysis. It’s not uncommon for the family to be given a vague reason, without it ever being explained why the person died. But even with an autopsy, the “bones” can be burned without ever being seen.

“…Are you… going to personally investigate this case?”

We’ve both been staring at our cups during the conversation, avoiding looking at each other, but now Aoba-san looks at me over the rim of his glasses, as if surprised by my question.

“The case? Me?”

“Yeah, like when Shitara-sensei went to Hakodate before…”

He seems to find my question very strange, though. He laughs. Or rather, he can’t hold back his laughter.

“Unfortunately, we’re not detectives. At the end of the day, I’m a medical professional. A scholar. It’s highly improbable for me to intervene with a case, and investigate on my own.”

“Huh? But what about Shitara-sensei…”

Professor Shitara went to Hakodate to investigate something on his own. Aoba-san shakes his head.

“That’s a rather isolated occurrence. It was probably both the first and the last time in his life.”

Seeing his confused expression makes me fully realise again how rare and unusual Shitara-sensei’s investigation in Hakodate was. Aoba-san suddenly stops laughing, and takes on a lonely frown.

“Well… maybe that was the first indication that something was wrong.”

“Something was… wrong?”

Immediately after that, Shitara-sensei developed symptoms of a serious illness.

“We face dead people every day. We desperately try to hear their disappearing voices. No matter how badly we want to hear a voice, sometimes we can’t, or we’re not permitted to. It always leaves me feeling irritated.”

Despite facing so many barriers - judicial, time, and customary - they strive to protect the dignity of the departed. Protect justice, truth. Like Sakurako-san, I don’t think of death as the end. I don’t think that death is a material “thing,” or that a corpse is a broken vessel. That’s why I want to pursue a career in forensic medicine. The unforgettable, dry, hollow eyes of the corpses I’ve seen drive me

forward. I've only faced death a handful of times. This must be how Aoba-san, who faces it every day, feels.

I see a twinge of anger in his rigid expression. Somehow, I understand why Sakurako-san would refuse to consider Aoba-san as a candidate for Hanabusa's manipulation. However, I feel like that anger could be hiding Hanabusa's presence.

"Then… What are you going to do?"

"Nothing?"

"Even though the circumstances around her death don't sit right with you, Aoba-san?"

"That's just how my job is. I perform an autopsy on a corpse, and determine the cause of death to the best of my ability. That's all. In many cases, depending on the condition of the body, there's little that can be learned. The rest of the puzzle has to be filled in with the missing pieces. That's all. It's neither good, nor bad. There are times when I feel helpless, though…" He says, shaking his head.

Is that why Hanabusa hunts his butterflies? Does he collect sphenoid bones, rather than missing puzzle pieces? No, that can't be. I really do want to trust Aoba-san.

"Why don't we investigate together, then?"

"What?"

"Even though you're not a detective, why don't we try following a case like Shitara-sensei?"

"Me? Follow a case?"

"Yeah."

It's best if I don't mention that part of the reason I suggested this was to test him. If he really isn't Hanabusa, I want to know how he'll act. I want to be able to trust him.

"Is this some kind of joke?" He laughs it off, saying there's no way he could do that, then takes another sip of his coffee.

I'm not laughing.

"…There's no way. I'm not Shitara-sensei," he says, perplexed.

"That's true, but we have Sakurako-san instead."

"…"

Sakurako-san, the goddess of bones, is like a hybrid between Shitara-sensei and Hanabusa.

"…Please give me some time to think about it."

He drinks the remaining crescent of coffee left at the bottom of his tilted mug. I nod, but I think he already has his answer.

While I'm studying after dinner, I get a text from Aoba-san. He says he's free during the long weekend for labour thanksgiving day. I open up my atlas. We're headed to Obihiro and Nukabira.

Part 2

The next day, I meet up with Sakurako-san at the usual tea shop to discuss our plans. There are chiffon cakes and Darjeeling tea lined up in front of me. I have regular roasted tea. Ever since I bought some as a souvenir, my mom has been drinking it all the time at home. It's aromatic, and goes well with cake, scones, and Japanese food.

"I'm going, too," Sakurako-san says as if it's obvious.

I can't help but laugh. She's leaning back against her chair, with her white shirt taut against her chest.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I just knew you were going to say that."

I didn't ask her about it beforehand, but I wasn't worried at all that she'd say no. She scrunches up her face at me.

"Even though Aoba-san will be with you, I don't want you getting into any danger. You still need adult supervision."

"Aren't you talking about yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

Of course, I mean that she's the one who needs adult supervision. If we're going to be in danger, we'll be in it together. I don't want to be reckless and get hurt, and I can't do this without her.

Aoba-san made plans to talk with the deceased's family in advance. There's nothing I need to do to prepare. Aoba-san even sent me the autopsy report. It feels like something I shouldn't be allowed to see. I don't know the legality of sharing those reports. The name and age are hidden, but it's still a list of personal- no, private-information. He probably sent it to me without permission. I'll have to handle this carefully.

It starts with the physique, skin colour, height, and weight, then moves on to the hair length, and pupil diameter. It records the details of more than just the body's physical characteristics, too. I notice that the size and weight of the organs, and the amount of fluid collected in the chest cavity are recorded as well.

Aoba-san told me before that after an autopsy, the body is completely empty. In this case, it seems like the autopsy took a particularly long time due to all the damage caused by the animals. I'm impressed by the level of detail. It has the size and condition of each individual wound, and even how much skin is missing. If I become a forensic scientist, I'll have to do work like this, too. While I look over the document, Sakurako-san tops up my teacup.

"But the lack of biological reaction to the wounds… Implies that she froze to death."

"That's what the report says."

Sakurako-san pours more tea into her own cup, then pops a few grapes into her mouth.

"But something still seems off to me. I know that some people like to watch dark movies when they're feeling sad, but… I can't imagine that anyone would want to have nightmares while they die."

"It's not uncommon for people deep in the woods to die from hypothermia or dehydration. Especially someone lightly dressed. But if someone knows that beta blockers will give them nightmares, why not take it a step further and take enough to die?"

That's what's been bugging me. You can say that it's hard to take that much all you want, but surely it's easier than wandering in the cold until you die.

"The fact that she brought the medicine with her implies that she had some knowledge about it. If she wanted to commit suicide, it's strange that she didn't just take a lethal dose in the first place."

"Yes… That's right."

There's an infinite number of reasons or excuses we could think up, but neither of us can shake the discomfort we feel about the whole situation. There's a reason we can't ignore it, too.

"I can't help but feel like someone… Someone suggested it to her."

“Yes, and Hanabusa is careful. Even if we think we’re outsmarting him, we could very well be dancing in his palm. This corpse could be a trap he set.”

We were thinking the same thing.

“But… If it’s a trap, doesn’t that mean we’re in danger?”

“The fact that we’re alive right now means he has a reason to keep us around.”

“Like what?”

“I have no idea. Lately I’ve been thinking that maybe this is all a game to him,” Sakurako-san says with a shrug.

Even though it’s getting close to dinner time, she orders caramel ice cream.

“A… Game?”

“Yeah, this is all a complex murder-game for him. I figured I might as well take him up on it. I don’t have a lot of free time, but it would be rude to decline the invitation.”

“An invitation… That doesn’t sound good.” I notice someone nearby, so I lower my voice.

“We don’t have the power to refuse, so we might as well confront him.” Sakurako-san snickers boldly.

I have to try not to smile.

“B-besides that, there’s also the corpse we found. What do you think happened to her?”

I turn to the file in an attempt to distract myself from the fear crawling in my chest.

“Someone probably made her take the medicine and alcohol, right?”

“I can’t deny the possibility, but it’s harder than it seems to force someone to take a drug. It’s not unheard of for people to mix sleeping medicine in alcohol, though. Some drugs are dyed so they turn blue when dissolved to prevent that, but not all of them.”

There are countless cases where alcohol is used to disguise the bitter taste of medicine that’s been added to it.

“Overseas, crowdfunding was used to create colour changing nail polish, and straw or gum-sized detectors to test for drugs added

to one's drink. However, there are still countless crimes where a detector either isn't used, or wouldn't be effective."

It's an even more serious problem in other countries where drugs are more common than in Japan. Sakurako-san tells me about nail polish that changes colour when you dip your finger in a drink that contains certain drugs, and a device created by the US drug enforcement administration with a similar function. If it detects a drug, it will turn on a warning light and send information to your phone. It's said that 80% of sexual assault is committed by someone the victim knows. It's sad that people have to be vigilant even when just going out for drinks with friends, or enjoying a meal with someone, but not everybody is a good person.

"Also, rape and theft shouldn't be considered 'minor damage.' They can still result in death, and should never be taken lightly."

"It's a hard world out there."

"Don't make it sound like it's someone else's problem, boy." Sakurako-san leans in close to me.

"Once you turn 20, you'll probably start drinking. Women aren't the only ones who have to worry about being roofied.. Men can be raped, too. It's less likely to be taken seriously when a man is the victim, so you should be very careful."

"I thought it was hard for women to talk about things like that."

I straighten my posture, since I'm suddenly being scolded. She has a pained expression on her face.

"Men are more likely to stay quiet about it, even though it's not their fault. Men are more likely to feel ashamed of being raped, and others around them typically don't understand. There should be no difference in society's reaction toward unwanted advances, regardless of one's gender."

In the end, men and women are both at equal risk of being the victim of a crime.

"So, as you said, we can't deny the possibility that she was drugged via alcohol. She could have been left in the woods after."

"If that were the case… It would be a murder, after all."

"Even if she were drunk, that doesn't explain why she would obediently follow someone into the woods. She showed no signs of

resistance."

"Oh…"

The entrance to the path through the forest is closed, you need permission to drive through the area. The spot where we found the corpse was quite a distance from the entrance, roughly a 20 minute walk.

"The puzzle of why she went out of her way to die while having nightmares, and if it was done on purpose remains. Why would she take a non-lethal dose of beta blockers? I'm curious about the reason."

There's also the question of if she was the one who wrote the emails sent to her family, friends, and boyfriend, as well as the suicide note found in her home. She had all her belongings, so there's no way she was robbed.

"She still had her wallet and the ring on her pinky finger. She didn't have any ID on her, but they were able to figure out who she was right away from her cell phone… You should get a phone, too, Sakurako-san. That way we won't have to use my phone every time we have to report something," I say with a reproachful tone.

She just huffs at me like a child. "I don't want to be contacted at inconvenient times. I shudder at the thought."

It's true that it could be annoying to get a phone call while doing delicate work with bones. She could just ignore it and call back later, though.

Just then, her ice cream with homemade caramel sauce is brought out. Sakurako-san's face breaks into a broad smile. She already ate half a chiffon cake, along with the ice cream that came with it on the side.

"…Gran's definitely going to find out and get mad at you."

Sakurako-san doesn't eat a lot, and she's picky. When it comes to sweets, though, she can really put it away.

It's already nearly 5:00pm. It's gotten dark outside, and the cold wind is shaking the trees by the roadside. It feels luxurious to eat cold ice cream in a warm shop on a day like this, but still, she won't be able to finish her dinner if she eats so much. I try to help by asking if I can have half of it not because I'd feel bad for Sakurako-

san if she were scolded, but because I can't stand the thought of Gran's cooking going uneaten.

However, just as she's bringing the ice cream to her mouth, she looks at the last page of the autopsy report from Aoba-san, the note about the woman's personal belongings. Her brow furrows, as if she notices something.

"…What is it?"

"Nothing… It's just, if she didn't have any ID, then that means she didn't have a driver's licence with her, either."

"Huh? Oh… That's true. Maybe she didn't bring it with her… or she doesn't have one in the first place… Well, they say less people are getting their licence lately," I add.

Sakurako-san looks at me quizzically, and tilts her head to the side.

"I was wondering… How did she get to that place, then? It takes just under an hour and a half to drive there from Obihiro. It's not impossible to get there on foot, but it'd take at least half a day."

"Yeah… She could have ridden a bike… but that doesn't seem to have been the case. She could have taken the bus, or something? Or even hitchhiked…"

There's lots of ways she could have gotten to Nukabira, but the forest where she died is far away from the rest of town. Even if there's a relatively low risk of running into a bear at this time of year, I can't imagine she would walk all that way to a desolate forest without cell service in the cold while dressed lightly.

"She must have taken a taxi."

A taxi still wouldn't have been able to get onto the forest road, though. Unless the culprit could open the gate? Tsuchiyama-san, the guide, suddenly pops into my head. Of course, I don't suspect him, but it could have been a different guide…

"There's no way to know for sure until we get more information. I sure hope it doesn't turn out that we did all this thinking for no reason."

Maybe we're overthinking this, and she simply didn't want to live anymore. Sakurako-san calmly shakes her head, still holding a spoon in one hand.

“There is a reason. I’m sure of it. Even if you can’t see them, the ‘bones’ are still there.”

Her spoon sparkles in the light. Outside, big flakes of bone-white snow begin to fall.

Part 3

It snowed continuously for a few days, so I thought that it would stick around for a while, but luckily it warmed up and mostly melted. I’m always a little bit happy to see it snowing, even though I know it means it’s the start of a long winter. I think our first real snow will be a bit later, though. It’s definitely safer to go on a trip when there’s no snow on the ground. There are always more accidents in winter.

We take the Doutou expressway from Shimukappu to Obihiro. Aoba-san is the one driving.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing…”

It reminds me of when my brother drove us along this same road before, so it feels a bit strange to see Aoba-san in the driver’s seat this time. He notices me looking at him.

“I-I’m just glad it’s sunny.”

I thought it was a natural excuse, but he grins as he looks out at the big blue sky.

“The weather is nice and there isn’t much snow, considering it’s winter. I’d like to come sightseeing here sometime,” he says with a forced smile.

He has a point. Tokachi is cold, but so is Asahikawa. Unlike Asahikawa, there isn’t much snow here. Even when the roads are salted, seeing bare asphalt in the middle of winter makes it feel like I’m in another country. Tokachi is also really flat. The endless expanse really reminds me of how big Hokkaido is. I’m always amazed at how different the climate can be just by crossing a mountain. Tokachi has more sunny days than Asahikawa, especially in winter. We call it “Tokachi sunshine.”

Asuka Aneha-san, the woman who died while watching the bridge slowly fall to ruin, came from this sunny town. Today, we’re meeting with her boyfriend, a man named Kikuchi-san.

“Did her parents…?”

They just lost their daughter, so it’s only natural that they would refuse to speak with us. Even if we have questions for them, it would be insensitive to press the issue.

“No, apparently her father passed away due to illness about a year ago. Her mother was quite depressed after that, so her boyfriend didn’t want us to bother her too much.” Aoba-san’s expression turns grim. “And she was an only child, too.”

“Oh, I see…”

That’s definitely a sad situation. I can see why Kikuchi-san is concerned. I’m worried that I’m going to have to listen to a sad story. All I want is to pretend like nothing happened, eat pork bowls and spaghetti sandwiches, buy some sweet potatoes for my mom, and go home… But if I did that, Asuka-san’s death would be ruled a “suicide.” No matter what kind of bones are hidden in her corpse, they would all be turned to ash. The truth needs to be uncovered, if not for Asuka-san’s sake, then for her family’s.

I know that Kougami suffered terribly when she thought her grandma killed herself. She hated herself, and her heart was crumbling because of the heartless comments from the people around her. Even a year after learning that her grandma’s death was an accident, she still feels guilty. A whole year, but at the same time, only one year. That’s not enough time for a person’s heart to heal.

No matter what the cause of death is, the people left behind will still suffer. Even if it turns out that it wasn’t suicide, the dead won’t come back to life. Asuka-san’s mom will be thinking of her daughter for the rest of her life. The same goes for her boyfriend. The truth doesn’t always help people. Even so, we still need to listen to her last words that her body is trying to tell us.

Sometimes I worry that I’m only acting out of morbid curiosity. Is this really the right thing to do? I wonder if Aoba-san felt the same way when he refrained from meeting with Asuka-san’s mom.

Since this isn’t a fun trip, the inside of the car is quiet, and the volume on the stereo is turned down. I can only faintly make out Diavel’s voice and the sound of the drums. There are no rest stops, and the food stalls are closed for the season, so we end up arriving

at Obihiro station quickly without taking any detours. Sakurako-san is fast asleep. Maybe she was bored, or maybe she was up late working on her skeletons. As soon as we get out of the car, she yawns with a big stretch. She always does things at her own pace.

I take a deep breath, imitating her. The air in Obihiro smells like the diary farms in the distance. Even within the same town, the air around the station is always different. Obihiro has a clear, unique scent, like sweet grass. Sapporo Station smells like smoke. I don't really smell anything in the wind near Asahikawa Station, though there are some places where you can smell the paper mill.

Asahikawa has a really tall sky. The sky is such a deep blue, it feels like you could reach into the stratosphere. Though we're only a short distance away, I feel a strange longing for Asahikawa Station. I decide to have some coffee and take a quick walk while waiting for the time we're supposed to meet.

The breeze is a bit cold, but the sunlight is warm. Obihiro Station is modern and quite lovely. There's a fountain, and several bronze deer statues that make you have to do a double take. There's also three large statues of hands. They remind me of the hand fountain at the shopping park, but these ones are more like a modern art piece. They're shiny, silver and red, and almost bright enough to make your eyes hurt. When I read the information plate that says "open up the city and forest, let the sky spread out" I feel a strange affinity for it. The sky feels truly huge in this city.

When I enter the station, I can immediately smell the irresistible, sweet and salty scent of pork bowls being made. Cooked over a charcoal fire and served with soy sauce… My stomach is in danger.

"I came to Obihiro recently, but I was so busy that I didn't get a chance to eat a pork bowl, even though it's their specialty."

"We'll definitely have it for lunch today, then," Aoba-san says, but Sakurako-san frowns.

She doesn't like pork. She doesn't really like meat in general.

"If you keep being picky, you're going to turn into a skeleton, Sakurako-san."

“Everyone turns into a skeleton sooner or later. It’s just a matter of how quickly,” Sakurako-san snorts.

No, the speed you skeletonize is pretty important… The Obihiro Zoo is the only one in Hokkaido that has elephants. It’s one of several places I want to see. I wish we could just go sightseeing then head home, but we leave the station and head to the meetup spot. We’re meeting at a coffee stand inside a bookstore. It’s a bit far away from the station, and near a hardware store, cafe, and general shop.

Kikuchi-san, the victim’s boyfriend, works in the bookstore. He doesn’t have time off work for the long weekend, but he said he can take a break during his shift to talk with us. Since it’s a holiday, the store is abuzz with families. While waiting for him to arrive, I wonder if he’s even going to be able to make it, due to the chaos. Eventually, a man with short, fluffy, loosely curly hair and round glasses timidly approaches us.

“Are you Tooru Kikuchi-san?” Aoba-san asks.

His normally messy hair is combed back more than usual, and he’s wearing a grey suit. His long hair still makes him look kind of sketchy. No, maybe it’s more to do with Aoba-san’s unique aura? He appears kind and calm, but the air around him feels strangely feverish. Although he seems a little suspicious of Aoba-san, Kikuchi-san exchanges business cards with him, and gives a slight bow as a greeting to us.

Kikuchi-san was confused about why Sakurako-san and I were there, so Aoba-san gives a brief, vague explanation about how we discovered the body. I'm interested in forensic medicine, and Sakurako-san does a similar job as Aoba-san. Kikuchi-san seems to accept the explanation, and introduces himself in kind.

He says that he was the boyfriend, and high school classmate of Asuka-san, the deceased. Their relationship continued after they graduated, and they lived together most of the time. Now he’s helping out Asuka-san’s mother, since she’s exhausted from needing to identify the body, and make all the arrangements. I don’t know if he’s nervous from meeting Aoba-san, or if he’s like this all the time. His eyes are red and puffy, like he’s been crying a lot last night.

“Um… Sorry to bother you while you’re at work.”

I apologise for interrupting while he’s in the middle of work and it’s so busy, but he shakes his head. Apparently his workplace is being good about making sure he isn’t pushing himself too hard.

“My boss says that it’s fine for me to meet with you, as long as I’m okay with it.”

It doesn’t matter if it’s an accident, illness, or crime. It’s always hard for people left behind when someone passes. However, losing someone to suicide truly chops peoples’ hearts into pieces. Perhaps that’s why he said he’s actually glad we asked to visit him.

“So then… What did you want to talk about?”

We all buy some coffee (well, Sakurako-san and I got orange juice) and sit down together so he can begin. However, neither Aoba-san nor I know how to start, so we sit in silent panic for a moment.

“Um…”

“We’re investigating whether or not she really committed suicide.”

Sakurako-san ignores the heavy atmosphere and jumps right in. I’m shocked by how straightforward she is, but I appreciate the brevity.

“…Asuka? But the police-“

“The police are only human, they can make mistakes,” Sakurako-san says quickly.

“…”

Now Kikuchi-san is the one who doesn’t know what to say.

“Don’t you feel like something is off about her supposed suicide?”

He flinches at the follow up question.

“…Well, I don’t want to believe that Asuka is dead, or that she froze in the woods, but-“ Kikuchi-san shifts uncomfortably under Sakurako-san’s piercing gaze. “When I heard that she committed suicide, I wasn’t surprised… I thought ‘finally…’” Kikuchi-san says quietly.

Aoba-san and I glance at each other.

“Finally? So you expected it…?” Aoba-san chooses his words carefully.

Kikuchi-san nods, then takes a deep breath before he continues.

“Asuka has always… Ever since high school, she has often mentioned suicide. To be honest, nobody takes her seriously, so… When she left, I thought she was just going to go home.”

A sad smile forms on Kikuchi-san’s face.

“We’ve… Been together for 7 years now. We don’t always get along. Just because we live together doesn’t mean she always stays here.”

“So basically, you had a fight?”

“Yes, but it was just an argument. I didn’t hurt her or anything. She sometimes hurts me, though. I thought she left early in the morning because of our argument, but then she sent emails to her family and friends that sounded like a suicide note.”

“When was this?”

“You mean when did she send the emails? It was after 5pm… So around 10-12 hours before she actually died, according to the police…”

“That’s almost half a day before she died, hm…”

“Since I was at work, I didn’t see it until around 9pm. Apparently her mom and friends all got an email at around the same time.”

“You mean nobody did anything about it?” Sakurako-san asks suspiciously.

I was thinking the same thing.

“It’s not like we didn’t respond. I answered back telling her not to say weird things, and her best friend asked if she needed help. Her mom tried to phone her several times, but she didn’t pick up.”

Shouldn’t they have asked the police to look for her, or something? I must have let it show on my face, because he looks down and says, “None of us took her seriously, in the end.” He has a bitter expression on his face.

“As soon as she calmed down, she’d go back to acting like nothing happened. Everyone was tired of worrying about her. I got

used to her saying ‘I want to die,’ so all I thought was ‘this again?’”

“So it was a ‘boy who cried wolf’ situation.”

The boy who cried wolf is one of Aesop’s fables. It’s about a shepherd who surprises everyone by saying a wolf was coming, but when a wolf really showed up, nobody believed him so it ate all of his sheep.

“Did she know how to kill herself?”

“Yes, she read about it online. Sometimes she would look something up and then tell me ‘this is how I’m going to do it.’”

“Do you know which website she used?”

“I’m not sure, but it should be in her search history or bookmarks on her phone. She didn’t care much for security, so I don’t think she has a password on her phone. If you want to know more, it would be better to ask her mom… Why do you want to know?” Kikuchi-san asks.

“I told you at the start, didn’t I? We want to know if she really committed suicide. The police decided that it was based on the circumstances, without investigating any further, but we thought it was too early to know for sure. They only looked at the skin, rather than looking deeper at the bones.”

“The… bones?”

“Yeah. There are a few things that don’t make sense if she killed herself, so we want to look into that. It wouldn’t be inconvenient for you if we looked into it, would it?”

“Wh… Are you saying I killed her?!” As Kikuchi-san raises his voice, all eyes in the store turn to him.

An elderly employee looks at me with concern. It makes my heart ache. Saying nasty things is Sakurako-san’s specialty. She intentionally makes people angry so she can see inside their hearts. She knows that what she says will upset them. It hurts me to watch.

“Not necessarily. When someone dies, they can’t speak anymore, so we want to listen to their last words.” I have no choice but to speak up, butI can’t bring myself to look him in the eyes.

“But accusing me is-“

“I know.” I cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “I don’t want to doubt you, but the sad truth is that many people are

killed by someone they know. Occasionally someone will target a stranger, but usually it's an acquaintance, so…"

My throat feels dry and painful, but this is something that I have to say. I lift my head.

"In order to protect the dignity of the deceased, we sometimes have to question the people close to them. Even their family. I know that it hurts because you just lost someone important to you, but it's the only way we can help those who have died."

Asuka-san's death looks like a suicide at first glance, but something seems off about it. I don't want to let the opportunity pass by without finding out exactly what's off about it.

"Investigating is the police's job. As forensic scientists, we have to find out how the person died. The cause of death was definitely from the cold, but we need to find out why that happened."

Kikuchi-san's face was red with anger, but just a few calming words from Aoba-san settles him down.

"You mean… You don't think she froze to death?"

"There has been no mistake, she definitely froze to death. I'll spare you the details because I don't trust you, but she took some medicine. It's not clear exactly why or how she took it. We suspect a third party could have been involved." Sakurako-san says it all in one breath. "Don't you think it's strange that she would go through with her suicide now, after talking about it for so long?"

"Well…"

"It would be different if she died nearby, but she had to travel to Nukabira intentionally. Aren't you curious to know why she died there?" I ask if he knows if she had any special memories there, but he shakes his head.

"…To tell you the truth, I have a lot of questions about how and why she died, but… I'm scared that she died because I didn't try hard enough to understand her…"

Kikuchi-san starts to sob. He rubs his eyes with the back of his hands. Sakurako-san sees this, and gently offers him a white, lace handkerchief.

"It's not easy to understand other people in the first place. Both the head and the heart are covered in so many layers of bone, fat,

muscle, and skin that you can't see inside. Completely understanding another person is biologically impossible," Sakurako-san says with a very serious expression.

She means it, too. Kikuchi-san seems to think she's joking, and gives a short, lonely laugh as he takes the handkerchief.

"You still want to understand people who are important to you, don't you…" Kikuchi-san says, tightly gripping the white handkerchief, hesitating as though he's afraid to stain it with his tears.

Sakurako-san leans back deeply in her chair, folds her arms, and lets out a low hum.

"Am I right to assume you're having a hard time believing that your girlfriend killed herself?"

"Huh?"

"There was a suicide note, and you had a fight. The circumstances are all there, but you didn't predict that she would commit suicide. Her death came as a huge surprise to you."

"…Yes."

Sakurako-san stares directly at Kikuchi-san. He listens in a daze, and eventually nods.

"At the funeral, her friends and relatives… Said it was our fault for not stopping or helping her, but… Even after the email, we still didn't think Asuka would die like this."

Tears spill from Kikuchi-san's bright red eyes, and roll down his cheeks. Many, many tears. His violent emotions and words don't seem to contain any lies.

"Umm… I know this is hard for you… but could we see the suicide note?" I ask timidly.

"…"

He hesitates for a moment while he thinks, then takes his phone out of his pocket.

"I don't want to see it again… But I'll never be able to erase the email."

"Thank you for everything until now. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you. In my next life, I hope I can be someone who

makes others happy.”

A simple, yet kind and heart wrenching email. We discovered her about a day after this email was sent. Memories of that sad, midnight blue come back to my mind.

“…I didn’t want her to be reincarnated. I didn’t need her to make me happy… I just wanted her to live,” Kikuchi-san mutters as he lets out another sob.

His pain is infectious, as tears start welling up in my eyes, too. I look away quickly to try to hide it, and see that another employee that’s been watching is also looking down sadly. However Aoba-san and Sakurako-san have an unchanging, tense expression. Just because someone pulls at your heartstrings doesn’t mean they’re a good person. Grieving is not the only way to mourn the dead. I wipe my tears and resolve myself to solve the mystery of Asuka-san’s death, for both her sake and Kikuchi-san’s.

Part 4

Kikuchi-san said that he actually planned on handling the situation on his own, but since there seems to be some mystery surrounding Asuka-san’s death, he asks her mother and her best friend “Yuka-chan” to help. Luckily for us, Yuka-san has the afternoon off work today. She already has plans, but she agreed to meet us for just a little while, so we drive over as fast as we can. The place we’re meeting at is a cafe right near the ban’ei horse race track that I wanted to go to.

“It looks like a pancake shop. I’m getting Deja vu.”

“Why?” Sakurako-san replies coldly.

We met Hiyori-san’s ex-fiancé, Hayamizaka-san, at a pancake shop in Hakodate, if I recall correctly. We were copying Shitara-sensei by following the traces left behind by the deceased that time, too. Though my heart feels a lot heavier this time. That time, we were following a case that was already over 10 years old. This incident only happened a few weeks ago, so the wounds are still fresh.

I glance over at Aoba-san in the driver's seat. His expression is gloomy, and he looks tired.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes… It's just… I don't normally talk with the bereaved families. Usually I only have to face the corpse," Aoba-san says. He sounds pained.

Facing the dead is incredible in its own right, but they can't cry or scream. They're silent and still. It must be overwhelming for Aoba-san to be around such raw emotion. I'm worried about the frail expression on his face, but I'm also relieved. There's no way that Hanabusa would make an expression like that.

"But actually… I'm not so sure that everything that he said was true."

"But-"

"Some people are good at pretending to be sad, like Satsuki-san. We learned in Hakodate that they could be lying, or trying to trick us. If you trust peoples' tears too much, it'll come back to bite you," I say with my cheek pressed against the cold window.

Then I realise that the same could be said for the person right in front of me. I sit straight up when I see his sad expression in the reflection on the window. Even though it was a year ago, the scar on my stomach is throbbing. If I don't think calmly and rationally, I'll be putting Sakurako-san in danger. Even though I'm worrying over here, Sakurako-san lets out a big yawn.

Eventually, the car stops near the racetrack. The area isn't just a racetrack, though. The entire area is fenced in, and contains several facilities where horse trainers and breeders live together like a little village. A glance over the fence at the tin roofs as we head into the cafe.

Sakurako-san murmurs, "I want a draft horse skeleton," but neither Aoba-san nor I hear her.

A tall woman with bobbed hair is waiting to greet us when we enter the cafe. Her silky hair smells like shampoo.

"Ask me anything," she says promptly.

The cafe has stylish, wood themed decor. After we're seated on a sofa near the back, we quickly introduce ourselves. Yuka Sagami-

san nervously plays with her short hair.

After seeing her hand, Sakurako-san asks, “are you a nurse?”

“Huh?”

“Inexperienced nurses often take notes on their hands like that.”

I notice faint markings from where words and numbers were written on her wrists. There seem to be a lot of them.

“On the inside of your wrists. It doesn’t go away completely after you shower. It looks like you write on your skin every day.”

Yuka-san forces a smile.

“That’s right. I’m not supposed to, but I can’t remember everything, so I do this in secret to keep from making mistakes,” she says, and hides her hand behind her back, embarrassed.

“Nowadays there’s rubber bands that you can write on and erase with a pen. However, with patient privacy and hygiene concerns, neither way is ideal.”

I learned from my grandma’s and my own hospitalizations that nurses have to work very hard, and their jobs are difficult. I admire them a lot.

“What ward do you work in? Internal medicine?”

“No, neurosurgery.”

“Oh? Your patients are typically older than other wards, then. It must be exhausting.”

“Yeah, it can be hard at times, but I think it’s hard for every department…”

We chat while placing our orders before Yuka-san starts her story.

“I’m quite certain it was suicide,” She takes a deep breath, then says plainly. She heard from Kikuchi-san why we wanted to talk with her.

“I see. What makes you so sure?”

“The reason… Because of the situation, or rather, the timing. What did Kikuchi-kun say? He doesn’t think it was suicide?”

“He said she mentioned suicide several times, but he didn’t think she’d actually go through with it.”

Yuka-san heaves a deep sigh upon hearing this. “That’s all you heard?”

“…What do you mean?” Sakurako-san asks suspiciously.

Yuka-san deeply furrows her brow. “The cause of the fight.”

“Well… Since they’d been together for 7 years, it’s normal for them to fight sometimes,”

I answer on Sakurako-san’s behalf. Yuka-san scrunches up her face even more.

“Is that not true?”

Yuka-san hesitates for a moment at the question. I see something almost like anger on her face.

“It’s not… untrue. But… their relationship wasn’t doing well.”

“Not doing well?”

“It was actually pretty serious. The two of them had been fighting a lot over the past three months, and… Kikuchi-kun broke up with Asuka.”

“Huh?”

I’m really taken aback by Yuka-san’s words. I thought that since they’d known each other since high school and been together for so long, they must have had a really strong bond.

“Honestly, they should have broken up a long time ago. Asuka just couldn’t let him go, though. She actually promised to move out of his place by the end of this month, but I think she would have kept dragging it out.”

Yuka-san mutters about how Asuka-san wasn’t in a good place mentally, of course.

“She said all kinds of stupid things about how she can’t live without Kikuchi-kun, and she’d be better off dead if they weren’t together. Asuka was always calling me crying at the end of my night shifts… She seemed ridiculous.”

I’m surprised by how nasty the words coming from Yuka-san are. Aoba-san is, too.

“That’s a pretty cold way of putting it.”

“It’s only natural,” Sakurako-san says with a shrug.

“I’m angry at her! I mean, of course I am! She chose to die because she couldn’t get over a failed relationship!”

She slams her fist on the table, rattling the cups and tableware.

“She said that he meant everything to her, and life isn’t worth living without him! There’s no way that’s true!” Yuka-san yells without any regard for the people around us. Her eyes are wide with anger, with big tears falling out.

She isn’t trying to be rude. She’s only frustrated and filled with regret because she loved her friend.

“…We heard that she frequently mentioned that she wanted to die.”

“Yeah. She used ‘I want to die’ to mean ‘pay attention to me’ or ‘help me.’ She said it all the time, so I wasn’t worried, but-“

She leans back into the sofa, as if the strings holding her up had been cut.

“Lately, I had been feeling some tenseness when she said that she wants to die. On the day that she died, I was working the night shift…”

Her work is on a two-shift system, and doesn’t allow people to use their phones during breaks, so she didn’t see Asuka-san’s email until 9am. She immediately sent a reply, but didn’t hear back. She got in touch with Asuka-san’s mom and Kikuchi-san, but they didn’t know any more than she did.

“If Kikuchi-kun had done something when he got the email, she might not have died…!” Yuka-san says angrily, but she looks disheartened. “…It’s true that it wasn’t unusual for her to say she wanted to die, especially since they’d broken up, so Kikuchi-kun didn’t think she was serious…” She says quietly.

She can’t keep herself calm. If Sakurako-san’s pancakes weren’t being brought over, she might have started to cry out loud.

The pancakes are covered in thick cream. When she cuts into it, the inside is all syrupy. She happily starts eating. The timing couldn’t be worse. Yuka-san looks tense.

“Sorry… But they say that sweet things reduce stress…” I say, gesturing at her caramel latte that she has hardly touched.

“It’s hard to say if that’s true or not. Some say that it’s good because it causes your body to release endorphins, but others say that it puts strain on the adrenal glands. Glucose is also needed to

carry tryptophan to the brain, which creates serotonin, but you have to eat meat or eggs to get tryptophan. Sweeter doesn't mean it's better," Sakurako-san says as she takes another bite of her pancakes.

Yuka-san looks at Sakurako-san, dumbfounded, but eventually forces herself to smile.

"…Asuka was kind of like that. She couldn't read the room… A bit of an airhead, always doing things at her own pace…"

Yuka-san looks at Sakurako-san and timidly mumbles, "could I have a bite of that?"

Sakurako-san doesn't seem to mind. She pushes her plate across the table.

Yuka-san takes a bite and smiles. "It's sweet," she says. "This store only opened recently. I wanted to come with Asuka… But it never happened." Yuka-san mumbles. Another tear falls from her eye.

I'm sure that sweet foods help heal peoples' hearts. Yuka-san stares off into the distance for a while, then suddenly starts to speak.

"I know that this isn't Kikuchi-kun's fault. I wish he'd done more to help, but… He was with Asuka for a long time, so I know that he was worn out…"

Outside the window, two high school girls walk by under the sunny, blue sky. Yuka-san watches them, with sadness and loneliness in her eyes. She must see her and Asuka-san in them.

"He… Has always been kind, ever since high school. But I know that his kindness wasn't good for her, so I urged her to be stronger… Maybe I was just putting more pressure on her…"

Yuka-san has calmed down after talking about her feelings, and is now cooperating with answering our questions. We ask if she knows why Asuka-san chose Nukabira to die - if she had seen it on a suicide website, or if she had any special memories there - but she says she doesn't know. She says that Asuka-san wasn't the type to use depressing websites like that, and had never mentioned Nukabira.

"She was always on social media, and going to scenic places so that she could get a bunch of likes…."

Apparently Yuka-san was in the grade below Asuka-san in high school, but since Asuka-san was born just before the school year started, they were born in the same year. Yuka-san says she always felt like the older one when they were together.

Even though her words seem harsh at times, it's only because she's feeling angry out of love for her late best friend because she left her alone in a dangerous situation. She's happy it wasn't suicide, but sad that an incident still occurred. Even more so at the thought that it may have happened due to her inaction. I can understand how frustrated she must feel. And whether it was suicide or not, her best friend is never coming back.

"I don't know what Asuka's mom will have to say, but… Please don't make her cry too much," Yuka-san says, squinting at the blue sky as we part ways.

"I can't promise that, but I'll take appropriate measures," Sakurako-san replies.

"It doesn't really matter," Yuka-san says with a bitter smile, even though she's the one who suggested it.

Between talking to Kikuchi-san then Yuka-san, Aoba-san has stopped talking as much. He politely thanks Yuka-san.

"…She looked beautiful," Yuka-san says abruptly.

"Hm?"

"It looked like she was smiling…"

Aoba-san and I look at each other, neither of us knowing what she's talking about at first.

"During her funeral. She had a lovely, gentle expression. She was smiling so happily, it surprised me a bit."

"Oh… Um…"

I finally understand what she's saying. Yuka-san is referring to the moment that Asuka-san died. She was worried that her friend suffered in her final moments. I'm not sure what to say. From what I remember, the expression on Asuka-san's face was far from peaceful.

"It was distorted," Sakurako-san answers while I'm still hesitating.

“It was not a comfortable way to die. Her mind and body were both in agonising pain. It’s only natural that her expression would be twisted with pain. Fortunately, the animals mostly only damaged her torso. The undertaker must have fixed her expression before the funeral.”

Sakurako-san’s answer is cold hearted. She might as well have thrust a knife straight through Yuka-san’s heart.

“Sakurako-san…” I tug on her sleeve, but she waves me away in annoyance.

“Why should I lie? This woman wants to know the truth. As a medical professional, she already knows that her death wasn’t painless.”

Sakurako-san looks to Yuka-san for confirmation. Yuka-san looks sad, but she nods.

“That’s what I thought… Thank you for finding Asuka.”

Despite Sakurako-san’s sharp tongue, Yuka-san bows her head and thanks us.

“Even though she was in pain at the end, I’m glad her mother and I got to see her looking happy one last time…”

Even though it’s winter, her body would still rot and be eaten by animals. If she had been found any later, it would have been painful for the family to identify the victim, or if she had completely skeletonized, they might have never identified who she was. Maybe it was a good thing that we found her while she was still pretty.

Yuka-san says that’s the reason why Kikuchi-san didn’t tell Asuka-san’s mom that he was leaving her. There’s no reason why the people who knew Asuka-san should hurt each other. It’s not what she would have wanted.

“…Every morning, I wake up hoping that it was all a dream. I always check my phone first thing in the morning, hoping to see a text from her about something mundane.”

But this is reality. No matter how much she hopes and prays, Asuka-san will never come back. The last email that Asuka-san sent was full of love and gratitude to her friend.

“I already knew that, she didn’t have to tell me… If that’s what she was thinking about, she should have told me in person.”

Yuka-san didn’t want her final words to be so kind. She covers her face with her hands.

Part 5

Sakurako-san had pancakes, but the rest of us hadn't had lunch yet, so we headed to the Ban’ei racetrack. You can enjoy some of the Tokachi region’s fine foods in the Tokachi Village within the racetrack. It’s nearly 1:00 pm, but since it’s a long weekend, the venue is still crowded with guests. Since a racetrack is a place for gambling, I thought it would be a bit more crude and shady, but it’s surprisingly spacious, bright, and beautiful. Tokachi Village in particular is brand new, as lined with restaurants and markets selling local foods and produce.

Even though Sakurako-san is still full from her pancakes, she orders a colourful vegetable dish with raclette cheese from the trendy bistro we’re at. Aoba-san orders a rice salad that uses local beef and plenty of fresh, leafy vegetables. Naturally, I’m ordering the pork bowl. We manage to secure three seats in the dining area.

The juicy, thick cut pork carries the scent of the charcoal grill. It’s super trendy, and the fat is sweet. Not only is the meat amazing, but the rice that’s been soaked in the sauce and juice from the pork is also superb. I really regret not getting a large. I want to order another one, but since they grill it fresh when it’s ordered, we won’t have enough time.

Aoba-san didn’t eat much at all, and Sakurako-san only picked out her favourite vegetables, leaving the soft, flakey shadow queen and sweet inca awakening potatoes behind. It goes without saying that anything Sakurako-san and Aoba-san didn’t eat ended up in my stomach.

The beef toro flakes are really rich, like a fatty cut of tuna, and have a strong, beefy aftertaste. It goes perfectly with the light, Japanese style dressing on the young, mixed green combined with the slight bitterness of the arugula. Even though the raclette has gotten a bit cold by now, it’s so good that I honestly can’t think of a better way to enjoy cheese and vegetables.

"…Anyway, Kikuchi-san didn't mention breaking up at all," Aoba-san murmurs.

We've finished our meal, and now we're looking for souvenirs for Gran and my mom at the market.

"Yeah… He probably feels guilty about it."

I feel bad for Kikuchi-san, but Yuka-san's argument was very persuasive.

"I guess it really was a suicide, like Yuka-san said…"

"We can't state that definitively. That woman is a nurse. She works with relatively elderly patients, too. She would handle blood pressure medication frequently, although it isn't very easy to steal drugs these days. It's safe to assume she has knowledge of different medications, as well."

"So… You're saying Yuka-san killed Asuka-san?"

I turn around to listen to what she has to say. She's holding a can of beans, and has her face scrunched up.

"I can't deny the possibility. You have too much trust in everyone."

"She has an alibi at least, right? Wasn't there evidence she was working at the hospital at the time? It takes about an hour to get to Nukabira from Obihiro by car, so I don't think she would have been able to make it there and back during a break."

It would be easy to contact the hospital to check if it's true. I don't believe she'd tell such a bold lie.

"That's true. She doesn't have to have been the perpetrator, though. She could have instigated a suicide, or been Kikuchi's accomplice."

"Sakurako-san…"

It's always awful seeing Sakurako-san so openly doubt people that were just shedding tears as they told their story a few hours earlier. Even if it's a sound argument, I don't want to think that.

"Well, whatever. We don't have enough information to draw a conclusion. Let's wait until we hear what the mother has to say," Sakurako-san says before going back to looking for souvenirs.

Aoba-san looks completely depressed as he stares at a horseshoe in his hand. A horseshoe that fell off a horse's foot is said

to be good luck.

“Aoba-san… Why did you choose to go into forensics?” I can’t stop myself from asking as I look at his melancholy expression in profile.

“Truth be told, I was originally going to go into pharmaceutical science. I was just interested in medicine,” He replies with a bitter smile. “But I was afraid of injuring or examining a living person.”

Aoba-san softly reveals that he isn’t good with living people. Somehow, I understand how he feels.

“So then… Why forensic medicine?”

I pick out a cute horse stuffed animal as souvenirs for Kougami and Azechi, but I’m surprised by how expensive they are, and put them back on the shelf as I wait for Aoba-san to continue.

Aoba-san hesitantly looks between the stuffed animal and the horseshoe, then mumbles, “because of my father… He died in an accident. He got drunk, fell over, and hit his head… Alone.”

His body was already cold when he was found in Susukino’s bar district. I asked that question to try and find out if Aoba-san is Hanabusa or not, but his reply is so sad that I wince.

“That’s… Heartbreaking.”

I try to choose my words carefully. Aoba-san immediately bursts into laughter.

“My aunt and uncle thought it was embarrassing that he died that way. My grandfather was a bad drunk, which only made them feel stronger about it. My mother and I never believed it, though.”

His gaze pierced through me.

“My father hardly ever drank. He wouldn’t get himself that drunk.”

His eyes tremble with anger. I can see that the flame is still burning in them.

“Huh? Then… You think…”

“My aunt insisted that my father was just like my grandfather, but my father saw my grandfather as a bad example and swore to never end up like him. He made an effort not to drink, especially with kids around. I tried my best to tell that to the police, but they didn’t care.”

The police didn't consider the possibility of foul play, and brushed it off as an accident. No matter how many times Aoba-san complained, they wouldn't do anything. A young detective felt bad for Aoba-san, and decided to investigate it personally. They found that Aoba-san's father got into a fight with a drunk. A woman said that his father had saved her from being harrassed.

"But… The police refused to overturn their decision. If they had done an autopsy right away, they would have been able to tell if he died from an accident, or from a fight. If they had found that a fight was the cause, the police definitely would have investigated it."

I can hear him grind his teeth in frustration. So that's why he wanted to pursue a career in forensic medicine… He faces corpses every day because of what happened to his father, anger toward the justice system, and to protect the dignity of both the deceased and their loved ones.

"In Japan, we cremate the dead, so they have a very short time to share their truth. Truth be told, very few bodies are heard. So many more have their screams go unanswered," Aoba-san says firmly. "I know I can't change the law on my own, but I won't stop trying."

His eyes are burning. I've always thought he was suspicious, but how am I supposed to doubt him now?

"…I'll work hard so that I can hear their voices, too," I say with determination.

Aoba-san smiles for the first time today, and pats my head. He buys me a horseshoe as a good luck gift. The U shape resembles a lower jaw bone. Maybe that's why he gave it to me. To wish me luck in learning to understand the dead. That horseshoe sat on my desk for many years, even long after I'd used a scalpel for the first time, but that's a story for another time.

Part 6

Asuka-san's mom's house isn't too far from Tokachimura. It's just north of the racetrack, and across the Tokachi national highway. She said she could meet us at around 3… A woman in her 40s

wearing a dark navy blue dress greets us at the door. She doesn't look like she's feeling so well.

"I heard about you from Kikuchi-kun."

She kindly welcomes us inside, but I'm hesitant because of how exhausted she looks. Her eyes and cheeks are sunken. Seeing how haggard she is, I can see why Kikuchi-san and Yuka-san were worried about her.

"Sorry to bother you during such a difficult time."

Aoba-san bows politely and offers her a box of cakes that he bought earlier.

"No, thank you for coming all this way." The woman accepts the cakes, and says, "my daughter would have loved these."

She offers some at the altar. In front of the altar is a pile of ashes against a white background, embroidered with gold thread.

"When my husband passed away, everything seemed so difficult… I was so confused, and I had no idea what to do… But thanks to that, I was able to handle everything easily this time," the mom says as she lights a stick of incense.

None of us are sure how to respond, so we pay our respects to the altar. The sweet, smoky scent of candles and incense makes me sad. After spending a long time with her daughter, the mom bows to us and we all move from the altar room to the living room.

Maybe Asuka-san liked bright things, because the couch we're sitting on is very colourful. I look around the room. It's surprisingly tidy. Or rather than tidy, it's more like there isn't much stuff. Maybe she doesn't have much left after losing her family one by one. The couch is beautiful, but it seems sad in this empty room. The lilies on the side table are discoloured and wilted.

"What would you like to talk about…?"

"Um… First of all, you usually live with Kikuchi-san, correct?"

"Yes, but he comes and goes. He has been staying here for the past half a month, probably because he's worried that I'm lonely without my husband around."

While she talks, she prepares coffee for us. I told her not to worry about it, but she insisted. It's already my third cup today…

“What was she like on the day that she disappeared? Tell us as many details as you can,” Sakurako-san says bluntly.

The mom looks a little worried as she tilts her head.

“Let’s see, that day… Right, in the morning… I got home at about 8:00 am. Kikuchi-kun was already at work, and my daughter had the day off. Everything seemed the same as usual.”

So nothing seemed off to her.

“Was she acting differently from usual?”

“Acting different… I’m not sure. Nothing felt particularly strange, so I think it was the same as always…” She starts to say, but then cuts herself off, saying “No, that’s not true. Actually, she was in a good mood.”

“…Huh?”

“Maybe she was just putting on a brave face? I’m not totally sure, but… She seemed happy when she left the house that afternoon.”

“…”

I’m at a loss for words. I don’t know who to believe. According to Kikuchi-san, Asuka-san ran out of the house after they had a small argument. Yuka-san says that their relationship had gone sour, and Asuka-san hurt Kikuchi-san. But her mom says that Asuka-san left the house in high spirits.

“Then… Do you remember anything about her from right when you got home?”

“I didn’t see her, she had just gotten in the shower…”

Apparently she had a quick, casual chat with Asuka-san through the bathroom door while she was washing her hands after returning home. She doesn’t remember the exact details of the conversation, but it was just like “welcome home,” and “if you’re hungry, there’s leftovers in the fridge~” and stuff like that.

“She didn’t seem gloomy from what I could tell…” the mother says.

Asuka-san isn’t a child anymore, so her mother wasn’t concerned when she wasn’t in her room.

“Speaking of things that have been on my mind… She left the house around noon, saying she’s just going out for a bit. I asked

where she was going, and she said she was going to meet up with a friend in the parking lot of the pachinko place right nearby."

"A friend? Do you know who?"

"No. I asked if Yuka-chan or Kikuchi-kun was going to pick her up, but she said it didn't matter who it was. She said it's someone I know, but… She got angry when I asked anything more than that."

Even if it weighs on her mind, Asuka-san was too old to want her mom meddling in her affairs. A mother has no say in what friends a woman in her twenties surrounds herself with. Even as a teenager, it feels nagging.

"She hated how other people could hear her phone conversations through the doors in the house."

"Well… I can understand that."

"But when she was a child, she had a lot of problems with making friends, so I can't help but worry about her. I had to make a conscious effort to keep my distance."

I understand how she feels, but no matter what the circumstances, I wouldn't want anyone eavesdropping on me while I'm on the phone.

"Oh, then maybe she went outside to make a phone call?"

"Hm? Yes, well… If it was something she absolutely didn't want me to hear, she might have gone outside… But she came back right away, so maybe they weren't available," she says with a nervous smile.

It doesn't seem like the relationship between Asuka-san and her mother was bad, since she came home often. However, the fact that she wasn't there half the time may be because her mother bothered her. Even as a high school student, I sometimes get annoyed when I'm asked where I'm going and who I'm going to hang out with. I'm glad my mom worried for me, but I'm not a little kid.

"When she came home, she seemed really happy, all smiles… But then, just after 4pm, she said 'I'm not going to make it in time,' and rushed out the door. When I asked what she was doing about dinner, she said she wasn't coming back that day, so I figured she was going to hang out with Yuka-chan and the others."

“So you’re saying your daughter didn’t give a single indication that she was going to commit suicide?”

“Not that I noticed, at least.” The mother answers matter-of-factly, without letting her expression change.

I was prepared for a lot of crying, so it seems a bit anticlimactic. However, her composure leads me to believe all the sadness and emotion has already been wrung out of her.

“You must think I’m a pathetic parent, huh? I didn’t even realize that email was a suicide note when I first got it.”

“…What do you mean?” Aoba-san asks. He had been silently holding his cup this whole time.

“Well… It was a short email, and it was close to my birthday, so…”

The mom takes out her phone and shows it to us. As she said, it’s a very brief message sent through social media.

“Thank you for everything, mom.”

“…”

It definitely doesn’t look like a suicide note at a glance. It could very well be seen as a simple thank you message for her mom’s birthday.

“But… I did think it was strange…”

At first, she responded with, “stop, you’re embarrassing me” as a joke, but her message wasn’t marked as read even after a few hours.

“What’s this all about?”

“Did something happen?”

“What does that mean?”

Even as her messages grew more panicked, Asuka-san never replied. It looks like she never even opened the messages.

“By the time it was past 10pm, I was really worried, so I called Kikuchi-kun. He said that he’d gotten a concerning message from her, too. I tried to call her, but she didn’t pick up…”

They couldn’t get in touch with Yuka-san, either, so they decided to wait and see what happened.

“…You must think I’m a horrible mother, since she always threatened to kill herself, but… It had been a bad habit of hers for almost 10 years now.”

The mom heard that Asuka-san had gotten emotional and suicidal after getting into a bit of a fight with Kikuchi-san, but she figured that Yuka-san was helping her feel better. If nobody could get in touch with either of them, it was only natural to assume that they went somewhere together to have a chat where there was no cell service.

“There are lots of places in Akan with bad reception, so I figured they went there… Or maybe they were having so much fun that they didn’t notice the call… I thought they would call me back once they had a spare minute.”

As dawn came, Yuka-san called back. She said that she was working the night shift. Asuka-san’s mom and Kikuchi-san called the police, but Asuka-san was already… The mom silently takes a few sips of her coffee. She looks exhausted after talking so much.

Sakurako-san crosses her arms, deep in thought. The silence is so heavy that I’m tempted to say something, but Aoba-san speaks up first.

“Could you tell us a little more about your daughter. About her personality and such.”

“She was sensitive,” The mom replies quickly.

“She was extremely shy as a baby. She started to get better about it in elementary school, but when she was in grade 6, she started to feel like she didn’t fit in…”

In middle school, she was aggressively bullied.

“At first, she acted like nothing was wrong so she didn’t worry us… But she started screaming in her sleep.”

“Screaming…?”

The mom nods. Not only did she scream, but she thrashed around in a panic.

“I was worried, so I took her to the doctor. They said she had an autonomic nervous system disorder. Apparently her brain wasn’t able to rest because of all the stress she was under…”

“In other words, she had night terrors. It’s a type of parasomnia.”

“Simply put, it’s like sleep walking.”

Aoba-san uses small words to help the mom and I understand.

“The cause isn’t always clear, since it can result from the part of the brain that controls sleep being underdeveloped. People typically develop it from ages 3 to 10, since it’s a sensitive time, but it’s not uncommon for people to develop it due to stress and anxiety. It usually goes away with time.”

“The doctor said the same thing, but also that it was important to immediately reduce the stress she was under.”

After questioning Asuka-san, her parents found out that she was being bullied.

“But… No matter how much we complained, the school wouldn’t do anything…”

Fortunately, Asuka-san had a friend. She was in the same class and also being bullied, so they supported each other and made it through each day together. That is, until the incident occurred. Asuka-san’s friend slashed the leader of the bullies with a boxcutter.

“...It’s a sad story. That girl couldn’t endure being bullied every day anymore, so she fought back as hard as she could.”

Fortunately, the injuries were fairly minor, and the school took steps to prevent the story from getting on the news. When her friend stopped going to school, the class’ hostility turned to Asuka-san.

“At night… When I saw my daughter crying, I found myself wondering why I had to send my daughter to a place like that. Even if it’s compulsory education, she shouldn’t have to go to school when it’s so painful for her.”

So the mom decided she didn’t want to send her daughter to school anymore. However, Asuka-san’s dad thought it’d be better for her future if she kept studying, so he requested to transfer to a different branch of the company when he went to work the next morning. Thankfully his boss was kind, so the whole family moved to Obihiro, the dad’s hometown.

“My daughter was actually born in Asahikawa, where you all came from.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Yeah, near Western Kawabata. There used to be a crepe shop, we lived right behind it.”

“Oh! Those crepes were so chewy and delicious! I was so sad when they shut down.”

With the topic of local shops coming up, the mood has softened a bit. I think if the conversation had gotten any heavier, it would have crushed me. Especially since the coffee I was given is too bitter for me to swallow. I think it’s gotten even more bitter since it cooled off.

Still, since Asuka-san transferred to a school in Obihiro, she stopped being bullied. She was blessed with many friends, including one particularly kind, close friend, and even a boyfriend.

The mom recalls how she eventually started bringing up suicide due to her sensitive personality, and although the mom was worried, Asuka-san had become more stable recently. As I listen to her story, it truly sinks in how there’s a whole side to Asuka-san that her mom doesn’t know about, like how her boyfriend broke up with her, and how she constantly told her best friend that she wanted to die. I could never tell her that. Even Sakurako-san can’t bring herself to say something so cruel to a mother that’s staring at the remains of her child with tears in her eyes. It might be because of her promise to Yuka-san, though.

“We’d still like to investigate this to the end, to find out if it was really a suicide, or if there’s a possibility it was murder. I realise this is a lot to ask, but would it be okay if we looked at Asuka-san’s phone, and things like that?” Aoba-san asks.

The mom nods slightly, as if she’s resolved herself, and brings over a white smartphone in a red, glittery case. It has a hand carved, wooden owl keychain on it. Given the heart shaped face, it might be an ural owl .

“Well… She used to get a lot of notifications on her phone, but all the data has been deleted, so there’s nothing left,” She says, plugging in the charger and turning the phone on.

Apparently she never had any security features on it, like a passcode.

“...”

The three of us look at each other before opening the phone. As the mom said, most of her internet browser history, contacts list, phone call history, and emails have been deleted. All that's left are the calls she got after she died. Most of the remaining emails are notifications from social media. Yuka-san mentioned before that Asuka-san was particular about her posts, and cared deeply about how many likes she got. They're all from after her estimated time of death. It's sad and painful to look at. Unfortunately, we don't know who she talked to just before her death, or what websites she looked at for information.

"Why would someone so careless about security go through the effort of deleting all her data?" Sakurako-san mumbles as she looks at the phone.

"Huh? Well… Even if her security is pretty lax, most people absolutely don't want anyone to see their history."

I sure as hell don't. I would rather jump into magma than let Sakurako-san see mine. Sakurako-san doesn't seem to get it, so she looks at Aoba-san.

"I would rather not let anyone see mine, either," he says.

Sakurako-san furrows her brow.

"It's less about security, and more like… Shame? Letting other people see your search history and bookmarks is embarrassing… It's not the best way to put it, but it's kind of like someone seeing you on the toilet."

"Even though it's just your search history?"

The more I try to explain, the more confused she gets. She just keeps asking, "why?" Does she have no sense of shame?

Still, as Sakurako-san suspected, it's entirely possible that a third party deleted all of her data. This won't tell us if Asuka-san's death was murder, suicide, or an accident.

"Did she leave any other notes…? Or perhaps butterfly wings?"

"There are all kinds of notes saying that she wanted to die, or was planning to kill herself tomorrow, but as for butterflies… She didn't like bugs." The mom slowly shakes her head.

I ask if she had any connection to Nukabira, but the mom says she doesn't think so. They had never gone there together as a

family, at least. When it comes to hot springs, the Moor hot spring near Obihiro is one of the best in Hokkaido. There are lots of hot springs around for day trips. Asuka-san preferred places like Akan and Kushiro over quiet places like Nukabira.

"I was surprised when I heard she was in Nukabira… Maybe she wanted to go to a town she didn't know."

Even though Asuka-san died in a strange place, her mom believes that she committed suicide.

"I think that's just how her life was fated to end," the mom mumbles lifelessly as we part ways. Her tone makes it sound like it's someone else's problem that she has nothing to do with.

As we walk back to the car, Sakurako-san says, "crying isn't the only way people express grief."

I wonder if Sakurako-san's mom stopped functioning like that when Soutarou died. Or maybe it was Sakurako-san's dad that did, or even Sakurako-san herself.

I want to be able to hear the voices of the dead. I want to solve the mystery of Asuka-san's death. But was coming here really the right choice?

Sakurako-san looks beautiful as she walks away from me with her black hair blowing in the wind. She seems like she's walking a little faster than normal. Like she wants to get away from the sadness as soon as possible.

Part 7

Thanks to Kikuchi-san, Yuka-san, and Asuka-san's mom all having different viewpoints, we're starting to piece together what happened leading up to Asuka-san's death. After leaving Kikuchi-san's house, Asuka-san went to her mom's house and either met with someone or talked on the phone with someone in the parking lot of the pachinko parlour nearby. It seems like she wasn't there for very long, so it's unclear if she actually met up with anyone.

When we arrive at the pachinko parlour, I notice that there's something like a park next to it. Actually, maybe it's a shrine. I can see white torii. It catches my interest, so I walk closer to investigate.

There's a small shrine and a pond. There's a sign saying Chomatou Shrine. It's called a shrine, but it's really just an altar with two stone lanterns next to it.

"Wah…!"

Through the dense trees, near the pond - or rather, swamp- is a stone monument that says "Blood Demon Swamp War Memorial."

"W-what is this?"

"It seems like that's the kanji used for the Ainu name for the swamp. There must be an Ainu myth about this place."

Couldn't they have at least picked nicer kanji? After looking into it, I learn that there was an Ainu war here. The Ainu called it "ci-homa" (injured) and "to" (swamp). The kanji reading is supposed to have come from a legend that there was a lot of blood spilled during a fight there. I think it sounds kind of edgy and cartoony, though.

"Wow… I wonder if it's haunted."

Sakurako-san snorts at my weepy voice. It's a strange place to have right next to a residential area and a highway.

"Well… Asahikawa has a lot of remnants from Ainu legends, too."

Asuka-san's keychain on her phone comes to mind.

"Oh, there's a wood carving of an ural owl." I stop to look at it as we head back to the parking lot.

Sakurako-san gives me a look that says, "so what?"

"It's just that Asuka-san's mom said she used to sleepwalk. I'm pretty sure the ural owl is-" I start to say.

"Kunnerekkamuy," Sakurako-san's eyes are wide with surprise.

"Kunne…"

Aoba-san, who has been walking a step behind us, says, wondering what we're talking about.

"The gods who cry in the night - ural owls are said to be guardians of the night who provide people with prey, and can dispel evil."

The keychain seemed quite old. The wood had been worn down so the corners were rounded and it was no longer glossy from being held. It's possible it was a gift someone gave her to help her sleep.

"…"

Sakurako-san listens to my explanation with a very grim expression.

The parking lot is nothing special, just a regular parking lot for a large pachinko parlour. I can't tell if she spoke over the phone, stood and talked, or got in a car with someone. Based on what we've heard so far, it seems like Asuka-san either didn't, or couldn't drive. I know that Yuka-san can drive, but I haven't confirmed if Kikuchi-san can or not. Since it was during the daytime, Yuka-san and Kikuchi-san would have both been at work. In that case, she was trying to contact someone else. We'll have to consider anyone else she knew .

"This isn't good."

Even though it's a long weekend, I can't stay overnight. I have to head back to Asahikawa soon. When I ask the other two what they're going to do, Sakurako-san quickly strides over and rings Asuka-san's house's intercom.

"Was there something else…?" Asuka-san's mom greets Sakurako-san with a troubled expression.

"The phone," Sakurako-san says briefly.

"Phone?"

"Yes, the owl that's attached to it. Where did you buy it?"

"This is about her keychain…?"

Sakurako-san silently nods.

"I don't even remember where it came from," the mom says, confused. "I think… she might have gotten it from her friend that was bullied before she transferred schools. I'm not sure where she got it, but her friend's father was a sculptor, so he might have made it."

That means she got it in Asahikawa. Sakurako-san thanks her briefly, then turns around and heads back to Aoba-san's car. She tells me to give her my phone.

"Just get your own phone alr-"

"Shut up. I don't want to hear your nagging today."

What a horrible thing to say to someone when you're using their phone without permission. I'm going to tell Gran about this.

After using my phone for a little while, she lets out a short sigh. She tosses the phone back to me, then presses her back into her seat with a deep sigh, and closes her eyes.

“W-what? What were you looking up ?” I ask while I look at my phone.

I pull up the website that she opened.

“A bus schedule…?”

It’s a pdf showing the schedule for buses that run between Obihiro and Nukabira. As expected, there aren’t many. There are lots of buses going to Kamishihoro and Shihoro, but only 4 going to Nukabira per day.

“If she left her house at around 4, she could have taken the 5pm bus…”

“There’s also a bus from Obihiro to Asahikawa that goes through Mikuni pass, but the last one leaves at 2:30, so it wouldn’t make sense for her to have taken that one.”

“I see…”

I look at the other file she opened, which is the Northliner timetable. Mikuni pass goes through Nukabira. I suddenly notice something.

“...Ah.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing… I just noticed that this bus through Karikachitouge also leaves at 5…”

Of course, Karikachitouge doesn’t pass through Nukabira, but what if she was trying to go to Asahikawa, not Nukabira that day?

“...”

Sakurako-san smiles fearlessly. Asuka-san didn’t want to tell her mom who she was talking to in the parking lot, but she said it was someone her mom knows. If it was Yuka-san or Kikuchi-san, she wouldn’t have avoided saying it outright. Maybe, just maybe, she got a call from a friend she hadn’t seen in a long time. Someone special to her. Someone who gave her a keychain that she still treasures after all these years. In that case, she might smile, even though she just broke up with her boyfriend. She would have wanted to go running out of the house.

“Um… What are you talking about?” Aoba-san asks worriedly.

Sakurako-san and I glance at each other for just a moment, but that’s enough to make me feel sure of myself.

“Just like her, we’re going back to Asahikawa,” Sakurako-san snickers.

Part 8

By the time we get back to Asahikawa, it’s already past 6pm. For dinner, Gran made homemade croquettes filled with fluffy potatoes and sweet lily bulbs. I almost hate how delicious they are. Since they don’t have any meat in them, they taste light and it’s easy to enjoy how good the potatoes and lily bulbs are. The potatoes and oil go so well together that it should be criminal. It’s pure bliss to be able to eat them fresh and hot.

They’re small, too, so you can enjoy a variety of different flavours. I always leave the first one plain, without any condiments. Next, I have one with spicy worcestershire sauce. Some sweet and sour ketchup, and tonkatsu sauce are good too, but plain old soy sauce and salt pairs best with the potatoes. The dark horse of condiments is ponzu mixed with grated daikon. Mixing it with a scoop of yuzu zest and chilli pepper makes the croquettes taste refreshing. I feel like I could keep eating them forever.

But naturally, I can’t really eat an infinite amount of them. Since Sakurako-san and Aoba-san don’t have much of an appetite, I eat enough to give myself heartburn. Even a glutton like me has his limits.

Gran smiles and says, “I can keep frying up more.” I can’t just leave them uneaten.

Aoba-san is staying over at the Kujou house tonight. Sakurako-san drove on the way back, but Aoba-san said that he’s tired. He heads to his room as soon as we’re done with dinner. I guess talking to the bereaved family is more exhausting than driving.

“I asked Asuka’s mother for her old friend’s contact information. It’s old, so there’s no guarantee that she’ll be there, but we’ll try visiting tomorrow,” Sakurako-san says in an oddly happy tone while she drives me home.

“But… It doesn’t seem like Hanabusa is involved this time.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. One of the people we met today could be a butterfly.”

“I don’t think Asuka-san was one of Hanabusa’s butterflies.”

I don’t mean to speak ill of the dead, but Hanabusa’s butterflies are usually more careful and cunning. Stubborn, too. I can’t say for sure, but something about the way everyone described her makes me feel like she didn’t have the strength to be a butterfly. However, all three of them said different things. That could mean that they were lying, or that Asuka-san herself was lying.

“I guess we’ll just have to piece the answers together little by little…” I sigh.

Sakurako-san smiles. “Don’t rush to find answers. You’ll end up missing something important.”

I wonder if that’s why they take all the organs out of the dead bodies, then measure and record everything about them. I think I need to learn to be a little more patient, so I don’t lose sight of what’s important. But more importantly, I need to study more. Even though I’m exhausted and sleepy, I sit at my desk for 3 hours after I get home. I feel restless, with a renewed sense of purpose. No matter what, I will become a forensic scientist.

The next day, I get an email from Azechi asking if I want to hang out, but I have something more important to do.

Aoba-san has dark circles under his eyes, but Sakurako-san looks the same as always. We set out to meet Asuka-san’s friend from middle school. Her name is Yoriko Hoshi-san. She has a small build and two prominent front teeth, so Asuka-san nicknamed her “Mouse-chan.”

Mouse-san’s house is near the old AEON store, in an area surrounded by newer buildings. When we get closer, I notice that the nameplate says “Katou,” not “Hoshi” like we were hoping. There’s still a chance that her surname was changed due to a divorce, or something. I ring the intercom with light expectations.

“Coming!” I hear a young woman yell after a while. She comes from the garden, holding a roughly one year old baby in her arms.

“Um… Are you… Yoriko-san?”

“No?” She replies, perplexed.

I’m surprised. Since she looks so young, I thought she was Yoriko-san and had gotten married and was raising children here. She definitely doesn’t look like a rodent, though. Makeup can completely change the impression a woman gives off, though, I know this well from Azechi the goth loli.

“We’re looking for the Hoshi family that lived here about 10 years ago,” Sakurako-san says while smiling at the baby, who seems to have no fear of strangers.

“Hoshi-san? Hmm… I think the person who lived here before me had that name…”

Naturally we don’t want to tell her the whole reason we’re asking, so we just say we’re helping an acquaintance track down an old friend.

“I don’t really get it, but it sounds serious.”

She seems to have picked up that there’s more to the story.

“I don’t know anything, but you could ask the neighbourhood association,” she says kindly, and contacts the head of the association, who lives nearby.

Unfortunately, from what I can get out of their phone call, they don’t know where Hoshi-san moved to, either. It seems that the thread has finally led us back to Asahikawa. Aoba-san’s gaze drops to his feet, he looks exhausted.

“Actually, I don’t know where the family moved to, but I do know where the father worked. You could try going there.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if he still works there or not, though…”

After nearly 10 years, so many traces of their existence have been erased. Still, I’m grateful to the young mother for helping us find a way forward.

Hoshi-san’s dad’s workplace - or rather, the workshop he often worked as a carver at - is in Nagayama. It’s a furniture workshop, on par for a town made of wood like Asahikawa. I’m a little worried it’s closed down by now, though. Fortunately, my fears are unfounded, and the workshop is still open.

In a complete turnaround from Obihiro's sunny skies yesterday, the clouds look like they could burst at any moment. I pull my jacket up while I climb out of the Kangoo. If it's going to snow, I wish it would just get it over with already. After two months of it you feel like you never want to see snow again, but somehow you're always happy when the first snow of the winter comes again. We step on the wood chips that are laid out in place of gravel as we approach the workshop.

The inside of the single story building is decorated with furniture that makes use of the shape and texture of the wood. There's a broken cuckoo clock on the wall just below the welcome sign.

"Welcome," An old man with a long, white beard wearing a coat over his work clothes says. He looks more like a mountain hermit than a craftsman.

We briefly explain the situation to him, and tell him that we're looking for Yoriko-san. His expression quickly turns cold.

"Hmm… I *do* know Hoshi-kun's contact information, but…"

The man leads us to his workspace. It seems like he holds classes here. There's a large desk with a few chairs and small tools. He offers us a seat across from him. There's another old man sitting nearby and watching us. He's tapping his foot and looks like he's wondering what happened.

"I don't know exactly what you're after, but he doesn't like to talk about it."

"We promise not to bother him, so please help us." Aoba-san bows very deeply.

"It's not that I think you're a bother, just…" The man hesitates while giving me a puzzled look.

"Um…"

It bothers me when people give me that look, but I can't help that I'm the most timid-looking person in our group. I can't just say, "I understand," and give up, though.

"Actually… We came here on behalf of an old friend of Yoriko-san's who has passed away. The police ruled it a suicide, but there are some details that seem off… So…"

I tell him the truth about how we're investigating on behalf of her family, and how we're trying to find out if she took her own life, died in an accident, or was murdered.

"I see…" he nods with a pained expression.

I tell him that we think she was coming here before she died, and that we think she was going to Yoriko-san's house. The man stares off into space.

"It's karma…"

"Karma?"

"This isn't going to be a fun story," the man grumbles. "You said you think she was going to meet Yori-chan, but I don't think that's possible."

"It's not… Possible?"

"That's right."

The man prepares himself to tell the rest of the story. He puts his elbows on the table and leans against them.

"Yori-chan passed away 3 or 4 years ago."

"...What?"

The man nods while I sit here, at a loss for words.

"It wasn't anyone's fault, but it's a sad story. She didn't die in a normal way. That's why I don't like to talk about it much… You said that girl committed suicide too, right?"

I nod. He sighs.

"That poor girl. She was so clever and well behaved, ever since she was little."

The man starts to tell the rest of his story.

Yoriko-san was bullied by her classmates in middle school. If there was a reason, he doesn't know what it was. The Hoshi family lived by the rules set by the father who took care of the house, since the mother was a doctor. As an artist, he had a unique personality and set of rules, which influenced Yoriko-san since she was a child.

"She wasn't allowed to watch TV, play video games, or read manga. If she needed to buy some school supplies, she had to draw a sketch, or read a difficult book, or write a book report first."

Thanks to this teaching style, she was extremely knowledgeable by the time she was in middle school. She had won

awards in art, memorised philosophy books, and got good grades in school.

“Hoshi-kun dropped out of high school, and always hated how uneducated he was, so I suppose he didn’t want his daughter to end up like him… She was a good kid, who never spoke badly of other people, so I guess she just didn’t fit in with the other kids.”

Before she knew it, Yoriko-san’s whole class had turned against her. Other kids would scribble on her pictures during art class, insult her, blatantly ignore her, exclude her from their groups, and steal or break her things.

“At first, Hoshi-kun would go to the school every time something happened, but it did the opposite of helping… The school turned a blind eye to what was happening, and Yori-chan was afraid of making things worse, so she stopped telling Hoshi-kun about the bullying.”

For a while, Yoriko-san’s dad thought the bullying had stopped, but that wasn’t true at all. Eventually, Yoriko-san attacked one of her classmates with a razor. After that, the story was the same as we heard at Asuka-san’s house. The injury was minor, and the incident wasn’t made public, but Yoriko-san couldn’t go to school after that.

“No matter what the reason is, you can’t attack people. Hoshi-kun was very angry at Yori-chan. There was nowhere for her to escape… She stopped leaving her bedroom after that.”

Hoshi-san told the old man that Yoriko-san’s friend, the one person she could count on, was a coward who transferred to another school. He probably meant Asuka-san. It’s not that he didn’t love her. In fact, it’s because he loved his daughter that he wanted her to get better. Hoshi-san had a coach-like personality, so he couldn’t accept Yoriko-san “running away.”

“I tried telling him that if he didn’t push her so hard, she might be able to leave her room sooner, but he never was a good listener.”

Hoshi-san said, “my wife and I are getting older. If one of us passes away suddenly, our daughter will be the one who suffers the most. Besides, I don't want her to waste her 20s miserably rotting away in her room.”

He refused any further discussion on the matter.

“In retrospect, there were lots of other things he could have tried, like therapy or moving somewhere new… It only looked like both of them were doing their best from the outside looking in.”

The first one to throw in the towel wasn’t the father or daughter, but the mother. The main reason being their inconsistent principles on education. Perhaps the mother was trying to protect her daughter from the father. She asked for a divorce.

“But instead, Yori-chan probably thought she was being abandoned… When Hoshi-kun and his wife went on a trip to talk things out, Yori-chan went missing… The poor girl committed suicide.”

From there, the story becomes truly tragic. Despite the search, Yoriko-san’s body was never found. After losing his wife and beloved daughter, Hoshi-san quit his job at the workshop, and moved out of the family house to live alone in a quiet suburb.

“He could be a bit extreme, but Hoshi-kun really loved Yori-chan. With her death, something important died inside of him, too…” The old man murmurs with a lonely expression.

He reminds me of Asuka-san’s mom, who we visited yesterday. He has the same pitiable silhouette, as if all the sadness has been wrung out of him, and now he’s withering away.

“I heard that the girl who bullied Yori-chan that got hurt was also bullied by the kids in her class before that. Children just don’t act the way adults want them to… I just wish there was more someone could have done about it.

The old man mutters angrily about how it’s both the schools and the parents who allow bullying to continue, then turns back to us.

“So, you can’t meet Yori-chan… Maybe the young lady you’re looking into was shocked when she found out about her… I’ll give you Hoshi-kun’s address, just in case.”

The man jots down the address on a piece of scrap paper.

“Thank you so much for your help.”

“Well, Yori-chan has been gone for almost 4 years now. It’s about time for some closure,” he says sadly to Aoba-san, who is bowing politely.

No matter how many years pass, peoples' hearts are never the same after losing someone they loved. As time passes, sadness starts to fade, and pain loses its lustre.

"There's old people like me who just live life doing whatever they want, while young people end their own lives… The world truly isn't fair," the old man says while we're saying our goodbyes as we head back to the car.

When I struggle to come up with a reply and just offer a bitter smile, he pats me on the back.

"But the one thing that's certain is that you should do the things you want to do while you want to do them. Dreams for the future don't have to be lofty. It doesn't matter what it is. If you try and fail, then you know more now. If you never try, the dream will just rot inside of you for the rest of your life."

With those words, he sends me off. As I'm about to do up my seatbelt, Sakurako-san, who is in the driver's seat, leans forward slightly to set up the car navigation system. For an instant, I feel something soft touch the back of my hand, and lose my composure.

"...What?"

"Nothing…"

Sakurako-san looks puzzled as she asks me. I don't know if she really didn't notice, or if she's just pretending not to, but I know for a fact what I just touched.

I press my cheek against the car window and wave at the old man. I definitely don't want to give up, but at the same time, I feel like I don't care if this feeling rots inside my body. I don't care if it rages inside of me. I don't care if it hurts. I just want to forget about this feeling.

Part 9

Higashikagura-cho is the town next to Asahikawa. That's actually where Asahikawa airport is, despite the name. My mom loves the mall and big supermarket they just opened there, so she visits once a month. For some reason, she always buys a fruit roll

cake from an old store there whenever she visits. It's easy to travel to and from our town's "neighbour."

The Hoshi house is in Higashi Kagura-cho, too. It's just a few minutes away from the campground that I fondly remember staying at. My grandma's favourite hot spring is near there, and the go-kart track where my brother broke his ribs with his reckless driving.

Hearing the story at the workshop has given me mixed feelings about this place, now. Bullies are the worst. I feel bad for Yoriko-san, since she couldn't keep up with the popular games or TV shows that her classmates were into. Nowadays there's lots of gaming platforms and media besides TV to watch, but there must have been less choices 10 years ago. Being deprived of those forms of entertainment essentially meant she couldn't communicate with her classmates. Hearing about how her father's strict form of education cast a shadow over her school life makes me feel scared to meet him.

But I can't act timid in front of Sakurako-san, so I silently wait until we reach our destination. As if broadcasting my weakness, it starts to rain. I expected a pleasant drive surrounded by tall trees, but the destination and weather are ruining it.

Hoshi-san's house is in the woods. We park in a spot where the trees have been cut down. It feels like the pine trees and the mongolian oaks that are covered in mistletoe are looking down at me.

"It's a shame that it's raining in the middle of the day," I say while I watch the water drip from the trees.

"It sounds like it'll be warm and sunny tomorrow, though."

Aoba-san opens an umbrella and lets me under it.

"Sakurako-san, the rain…"

Sakurako-san has already started running toward the log house up the path. I don't want her to go alone, so I step out from under the umbrella and chase after her.

I notice smoke rising from the chimney. Someone must be home. We were told that he got divorced and is living alone, but that might not be true anymore. What if he has a new family? He probably wouldn't want us bringing up any issues. His new wife

might not even know about his daughter's suicide. She would have nothing to do with this.

Sakurako-san doesn't get an immediate response when she knocks on the door, so she starts slamming on it repeatedly. I'm relieved when I see a man open the door. He has thin hair, and he smells of sweat. Could he be Yoriko-san's father?

"Are you Hoshi-san?"

I stand in front of Sakurako-san, as if to protect her.

"I am…" the man replies quizzically.

"We heard about you and your dead daughter from the workshop you used to work at. We're here on behalf of your daughter's old friend. We need to talk to you," Sakurako-san says as she peeks out from behind me. "Well, I said we're here on her behalf, but she's actually dead. We think she was looking for your daughter before she died-"

The man cuts Sakurako-san off by slamming the door closed.

"Ah… Hey!"

I can clearly hear the sound of the door locking.

"What happened?" Aoba-san asks nervously once he finally catches up and sees us clinging to the door.

"We just want to talk! We won't cause any trouble!" Sakurako-san yells.

"You're already causing trouble!" The man angrily shouts back. "That girl isn't here anymore! Go away! Leave! And don't come back!"

I'm surprised by how strongly he's rejecting us. His voice sounds more like he's a bit sad, rather than purely angry. Sakurako-san inspects the door hinges, then takes a few steps back and lifts her leg-

"N-No! Don't kick it!"

I grab her shoulders and pull her back.

"You're in the way," she says.

She's leaning against me so she doesn't fall over.

"No, you really can't do that. You'll be reported for trespassing and property damage. Gran will scold you."

"..."

Aoba-san and I both drag Sakurako-san back to the car with a sigh.

“Do you think he got angry because he has something to hide?”

“Of course he’s mad, since the body hasn’t been found yet. 4 years may seem like a long time, but it’s not. I can’t believe you tried to kick the door down…”

“That’s right. Also, you said ‘your dead daughter’ out of the blue. Couldn’t you have phrased it nicer?”

Aoba-san and I both scold her. She clicks her tongue loudly to show her displeasure.

There’s no point in staying here, so we drive to Kougami’s favourite Hawaiian pancake shop. Sakurako-san has had pancakes for two days in a row now. Both times they were covered in whipped cream and caramel, too. Since it’s lunch time, Aoba-san orders the ahi poke avocado bowl, while I have the mochiko chicken plate with mini pancakes. I missed my chance to speak up, but honestly, I wanted to have pancakes yesterday, too.

“So… Asuka-san really didn’t come to Asahikawa, after all?”

At least, I don’t think she ever made it to Hoshi-san’s house. We found this address through the workshop, but she could have found out about what happened to Yoriko-san differently, like from her old school.

“I don’t know. If it wasn't Yoriko, then who was she trying to contact in the first place… It’s frustrating, but perhaps we were mistaken.”

“Yeah… That’s true,” Sakurako-san mumbles, frustrated, while cutting up her pancakes.

“But yesterday it felt like there was no way forward, huh?”

Aoba-san nods, agreeing with me and trying to comfort the disappointed Sakurako-san. At the very least, I couldn’t think of any other option other than going back to Asahikawa yesterday, especially with my curfew and how exhausted Aoba-san was.

“But if Asuka-san’s death wasn’t related to Yoriko-san, then what happened? Is someone lying, or is someone else the culprit?”

“Or maybe there wasn’t any big reason, and it was just a random suicide.”

“There’s always a reason. For everything. Without bones, people cannot move or live,” Sakurako-san says flatly in refusal.

“Isn’t it possible that she just… committed suicide because she was depressed about the breakup?”

“That’s absolutely ridiculous. Committing suicide because you broke up with your lover? How dramatic,” Sakurako-san says with a dismissive snort.

“Um, no… It’s not that unusual…” Aoba-san hesitantly corrects her.

“That’s so stupid!” her widened eyes seem to say. She slumps down as if in low spirits, and solemnly continues eating her pancakes. It’s rare to see Sakurako-san down like this. I didn’t think she had a human heart…

“I think… Asuka-san’s personality depended on the people around her. Maybe she didn’t know how to live without Kikuchi-san and Yuka-san around her, like how Minami-san and the other ‘three sisters’ needed each other.”

If that were the case, then someone who managed to capture her heart could have driven her to choose death.

“Then I suppose we’ll have to go back to Obihiro and look into the people around Kikuchi-san and the others–”

“Um…” Aoba-san speaks up as Sakurako-san starts to talk. “It’s true that we don’t know all the details yet, but shouldn’t we stop looking into Asuka-san’s case now?”

“Huh? But…”

I’m surprised by Aoba-san’s timid, apologetic proposal. If we do that, Asuka-san’s death will just be ruled a suicide.

“I get it. You’re thinking that I’m too half-hearted, right? But… Doing something like this was impossible from the start. I’ll never be like Shitara-sensei, and this… Isn’t part of my job.”

“So… You’re giving up…?”

I stare, dumbfounded, as Aoba-san nods. I can’t accept this.

As I turn around to ask Sakurako-san what she thinks, she just briefly says, “okay.”

“Wait! What about Asuka-san’s family?! You’re just going to let them live with the pain of thinking that she committed suicide?!”

“It’s unavoidable. Regardless of the reason, it’s always hard to accept the death of a family member. Besides… Everyone around her has already accepted that Asuka committed suicide.”

“But!”

Sakurako-san puts a finger to her lips, telling me to lower my voice that has become louder than I realised.

“But… I feel bad for them…”

“For who?”

“Huh?”

“Who do you feel sorry for?”

“What? You mean-”

I don’t know how to answer Sakurako-san’s sudden question at first. She picks up my phone, which I left on the table.

“Boy. Asuka Aneha’s family isn’t the same as Yuriko. Helping them won’t ease your friend’s suffering.”

“...That’s not why-”

“No, that *is* why. Asuka’s family reminds you of Yuriko, so you don’t want to let them down. I’ll say it again - Asuka Aneha is not the same as Yuriko’s grandmother. They’re two completely different incidents… Backing out now will hold no consequences, and won’t hurt Yuriko.”

“...”

I feel like I’m being doused with cold water. I want to tell her that she’s wrong, but I can’t. She’s completely correct. The one reason why I can’t ignore this case with Asuka-san is because of Kougami. Because I remember how sad my friend was when she lost her grandma.

“Tatewaki-kun… It’s important to be considerate of the family, but you mustn't empathise with them. If you start to see them as someone you know, you won’t be able to see the corpse objectively anymore,” Aoba-san says kindly. “Let’s stop this.”

“Go see Yuriko.”

“...What?”

“What you need right now isn’t the dead or her family, but your friends. Especially that girl. She reminds me a bit of you when we first met. She’s desperately trying to find something to fill the

emptiness. Go give her a shoulder to lean on," Sakurako-san says in a gentle voice.

When I first met Sakurako-san, I was lost because of the gap in my life left behind from my brother moving for college and my grandma passing away. I didn't have any hobbies I could immerse myself in, or any real goals. I found it hard to breathe because of the indescribable anxiety and impatience I felt, like the sky was closing in on me. Sakurako-san gave me a purpose and a goal, widening my horizons again. After meeting her, my world changed.

"Then you should come with me, Sakurako-san. Kougami asked me if I wanted to go to karaoke today, and I'm sure she'd be 100 times happier if you came along."

"Wh…"

Karaoke?! Sakurako-san's eyes widen . Well, I already know that she isn't a very good singer, since I heard her sing Diavel's "DOKURO" in Hakodate.

"That's a good idea. You haven't been to karaoke in years, right? If you don't go to places like that to expand your knowledge, you'll get stuck in the past."

Thanks to Aoba-san's support, Sakurako-san reluctantly mumbles, "okay, I guess."

I immediately text Kougami, and she replies in seconds. She never responds that fast when it's just me… Well, as long as she's happy.

"...I think I'll spend the rest of the day sightseeing around Asahikawa, since I have the day off. I want to go to Asahiyama Zoo."

Aoba-san tries his best to sound cheerful, even though our investigation has come to a rather unsatisfying close. But we're not detectives, police officers, or Shitara-sensei. There's no helping it. There's nothing we can do from here.

Part 10

Azechi the goth loli sings anime songs at karaoke. The song is from the anime adaptation of a popular social network game. Sakurako-san looks astonished when Azechi smiles and waves

every time her ‘wife’ comes on the screen. Yeah… I feel like it’s too much for Sakurako-san to handle…

Kougami is sitting between Azechi and Sakurako-san, happily sipping her melon soda. As long as she’s happy, I guess… Unfortunately, Imai couldn’t come because he already had plans. I feel blessed to be at karaoke with three cute girls. Well, Azechi and Sakurako-san are only cute if they don’t say anything, though. Yet I always feel out of place. It’s this overwhelming feeling like I don’t belong. I wish I were Shoutarouko-chan instead.

“You seem like you’ve never been to karaoke before, Kujou-san,” Azechi says after she’s done singing a few songs.

“I’ve never gone on my own, but I went with a friend in high school before.”

“What?! You had friends?!” Azechi yells into the microphone, which is still switched on.

“There are people who understand me, just as there are for you.”

Sakurako-san’s eye twitches at the rude comment.

“Well, there are people with weird tastes out there.” “They must have strange tastes, then.” Kougami and I speak at the same time. I can’t help but laugh.

Things are still a little awkward between us, but it feels like we’ve gotten closer since Halloween.

“What was your friend like?” Kougami asks once everyone has stopped laughing.

“Let me think… She was good natured and intelligent, though she could be careless at times. Her name was written with the characters for ‘wish’ and ‘spring’, and pronounced as Miharu.”

“Like a lily magnolia, then? That’s wonderful!” Kougami says ecstatically.

“Lily magnolia?” Azechi asks before I get the chance.

“Yeah, it’s a flower that blooms at the same time as cherry blossoms. Don’t you think it’s fate that they were both named after spring flowers?”

“ We’re named after flowers, too…” Azechi frowns, looking a bit jealous.

A different kind of jealousy rises up inside of me.

“...Your friend was a girl, right?”

“Well, I went to an all girls’ school,” Sakurako-san says as if it was a stupid question, completely unaware of my worries. “She had excellent grades so she was supposed to go to a better school, but she got appendicitis and needed surgery the day before the entrance exam for her first choice school. She was a truly unlucky girl, ahaha .”

It’s definitely unfortunate, but thanks to that incident, Sakurako-san and Miharu-san were able to meet and become friends. I think that’s undeniably lucky. For better or for worse, Sakurako-san changes people. Even though it was many years ago, her friend is still dear to her. I wonder if Asuka-san still cared so deeply for the friend she lost, even at the end…

“Tatewaki is always weird, but he’s being especially annoying today,” Azechi says rudely.

I didn’t realise I’d zoned out while thinking about what happened to Asuka-san.

“Something bad– It’s just that something sad happened.”

“Seriously? I looove stories about people being unhappy.”

Even if that were true, you shouldn’t say it out loud… I didn’t say that to her, though. I clumsily explained to Azechi how we’d found Asuka-san’s corpse, and how we hadn't made any progress yesterday and today.

“...So you’re just gonna give up, then?” Kougami murmurs sadly.

“Yeah, well… We talked about what to do next…”

Azechi nods along, looking at me as if urging me to continue.

“It turned out her friend had passed away already, and we couldn’t find any way the two were connected…”

“But there’s so many ways to talk to people these days? Information and messages can move around in countless different ways these days.”

Azechi leans back in her chair, staring into space like she’s thinking about something.

“So, what about her social media?” She asks.

“Social media?”

“Yeah, since she kept getting likes and replies after she died, right?”

“Oh, yeah…”

“Doesn’t that mean she posted something that went viral? Most people wouldn’t keep getting thay many notifications within a few days after they died, right?”

“…”

It’s true, we heard that she posted a lot online. I heard she posted pictures just to get likes, so I thought the notifications were just a reaction to that. It is strange that they’d still be getting so much attention after she stopped posting, though.

“Then… How can I look into that?” Sakurako-san asks.

“Well, you’d need to know the name of her account. Maybe her friend knows it? And if you knew her password… We could log into it,” Azechi replies.

I quickly message Aoba-san to ask for Kikuchi-san’s phone number. Luckily, he answers right away. He only knows one of her main social media accounts.

“She was obsessed with likes, so she had a whole bunch of accounts… I think she would have used the same username on all of them, though.”

Azechi looks her up, like she’s done this a million times. I start typing into my own phone, but stop once I see a certain post.

“Sakurako-san… Look at this.”

I tremble as I hand my phone to her. There was a post from about a month ago with almost 100 000 retweets.

“I’ve been thinking about a lot of things lately,

But after thinking about myself, I realised that there’s always something going wrong.

In middle school, my friend and I were being bullied.

Nobody did anything to help us, and it was really tough. My parents were worried, so they transferred me to a different school.

I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t take the bullying anymore, so I transferred,

Leaving my friend behind.

I don't know what happened to her after that, and I'm scared to find out.

I haven't talked to her in a long time, so I don't even know what to say.

I also met a new best friend and got a boyfriend at my new school.

I've been through a lot of heartache, but I'm a lot happier now than I was back then.

That's why there's a part of me that wants to know how she's doing now.

Every time I see my part of our matching keychains that her dad made for us, I think of her.

I want to tell her I'm sorry. I want to apologise for everything.

But I want to know how she is even more than that.

I don't mind if she hates me.

Most importantly, are "you" happy now?

If you're still lost in the dark, I want to help you this time."

There are over 100 comments on the post. Some expressing sympathy, some criticising or defending her, and some from people confessing that they're being bullied too.

"Oh! I saw this one… I cried when I read it," Azechi mumbles.

Oh, come to think of it, Azechi also moved away from her old life to live in Asahikawa.

"When did this person die?" Kougami asks, hugging her friend tight.

"Early November…"

"I see. That matches up with the post history, then," Kougami says.

This account hasn't posted anything since November 1st. Her last post just said, "what should I wear?" It seems like a normal thing

to say, but you could interpret it that she was going to meet someone special.

"...Maybe someone who knew Yoriko-san saw this post, recognized Asuka-san, and messaged her."

Even we can tell that Asuka-san wrote this, and we didn't know her personally.

"Is it possible to see any interactions between her and someone else?"

"You can normally only see posts that someone has made public, so you can't read someone's DMs or anything. We'd have to log into her account to check."

"Can you do that?"

"Kujou-san… I'm just a silently geeky goth, not a hacker for a crime syndicate. I don't have the technology to hijack a stranger's account."

As expected, Azechi declines the impossible task Sakurako-san has given her.

"...Well, I could try putting her family member's, boyfriend's, or her own birthday in. Most people don't use those these days, but some people don't care about security, so it doesn't hurt to try."

Azechi informs us that surveys have found that over half of girls use their boyfriend's birthday as a password… Since I don't know any of their birthdays, I call Kikuchi-san again. Fortunately, he knows Asuka-san's, Asuka-san's mother's, and Yuka-san's birthdays, so I don't need to call anyone else.

"Isn't using someone else's account a crime?"

"Even if it is, the owner is dead, so nobody will mind."

Azechi puts the birthdays she just heard into her phone. Asuka-san didn't care much about security. I was praying that one of them would work, but none of them do.

"There are countless other things she could have used, like anniversaries and stuff, so there isn't really anything else I can do…"

Azechi gives up and puts her phone on the table.

"At least we found her account. Thank you."

I ask Azechi to order anything she wants as a reward. She eagerly opens up the menu. I thought she was happy, but I notice

her breathing sounds like she's crying.

"...But if she really did it because she was bullied… It must have been too hard to forget, even as an adult…"

She's hiding behind the menu so we can't see her cry.

"...If anyone tries to bully you again, I'll protect you, Ran."

Kougami cuddles up close to Azechi. Azechi is a good person. She's always worried about Kougami, and she gives me advice all the time.

"I'll help you, too. I know Imai will as well. You're such a good person that it's hard to believe you suffered through that. I'm glad I was able to be friends with you through Kougami. I'm sure that mistake won't repeat itself."

If Asuka-san wasn't a good person, her friend and boyfriend wouldn't have been so worried about her.

"Why do nice people end up getting bullied?"

"Discomfort," Sakurako-san replies to my mumbling.

"Discomfort?"

"Right. Children unavoidably live in a very narrow world. If something seems out of place in that tiny world, they automatically want to exclude or stamp it out. It's an instinctive fear that comes from living in groups."

Sakurako-san takes Azechi's hands, and lifts her face so she can cup her palms around Azechi's tear stained cheeks.

"But when we grow up, those things start being called 'individuality' or 'charm.' It's a gift or quality that each person has. However, children are always afraid of such beautiful things, parts of people that make them different. It's true that you were rejected by a group once, but I take that as a sign that you're a person who's overflowing with charm. I think of you as an extremely vibrant person."

Sure, Azechi can be eccentric, but that's what makes her so cool and interesting. Like Sakurako-san said, she's definitely unique. Suddenly, I think about Sakurako-san's school days. I can't imagine there was a time when she was "normal, since she's so "unique" now.

Watching Sakurako-san hug Azechi, repeating “It’s okay,” over and over while Azechi’s tears fall onto her shirt, I wonder if Sakurako-san experienced the same pain in the past. That might be why she didn’t go to the school that most daughters of wealthy families went to. But just like Azechi can smile with Kougami every day now, I’m relieved that Sakurako-san had understanding people in her life, like Miharu-san and Sasaki-sensei. I’m glad she’s still who she is.

In the end, Sakurako-san never sang a single song during karaoke.

“You know… I still think it’d be good to clear things up with the situation about Asuka-san. Even if you think you know the answer, it’s hard not knowing for sure,” Kougami says while walking down the hallway and gazing out the window at the dark sky.

Although it hasn’t started raining yet, the colour of the sky makes it look like it could burst at any moment.

“Did she fit any of the stereotypes? Like the things people usually do before committing suicide?” Azechi says, sniffling.

“Like putting her affairs in order? Or lining up her shoes?”

“There’s actually very few cases of people actually lining up their shoes before committing suicide,” Sakurako-san answers Kougami, who’s tilting her head to the side.

“Like when someone drowns, they’ll be holding rocks, seaweed, or another victim’s hair in their hands. Or when someone dies by hanging, the strangled area decomposes faster, causing their head to fall off. Maybe something like that?” I add.

“That’s correct,” Sakurako-san says.

“I wasn’t looking for anything that serious,” Azechi says with a disgusted look on her face.

“I thought everyone seemed surprisingly upbeat, and cared a lot about what happened after they died… Money aside, none of them really seemed to be in despair…” I find myself murmuring out loud while thinking about the people I joined a suicide group with on Hanabusa’s orders before.

“Did you think of something?” Kougami looks at me suspiciously.

“Oh, no… it’s just something I’ve heard about…”

I hurriedly look to Sakurako-san for help, but she’s wearing a grim expression with her arms crossed, thinking about something.

“...Sakurako-san?”

“Contact Asuka’s mother.”

“Hm?”

“I want to check something in her purse.”

“Her purse… It didn’t seem like any money was taken, though…”

“Whatever, just call her.”

Sakurako-san doesn’t explain anything to me as I call Asuka-san’s mom with the number that Aoba-san got from her.

“Seriously, get your own-”

“Quiet. Later.”

Sakurako-san says roughly as she snatches the phone from me.

“I want you to check inside your daughter’s purse and any mail addressed to her,” Sakurako-san says as soon as Asuka-san’s mom picks up the call, without so much as a greeting.

I press the button to put the call on speaker phone while we wait for her to come back.

“What am I looking for?” a voice soon replies.

“First, look for any receipts. Did she buy any unusually expensive items? Particularly any bought with a credit card?”

“Unusually expensive… Let me check.”

“A credit card statement would work, too. Just look for any purchases that were outside your daughter’s means.”

The mom seems troubled by the sudden request, but I can hear her rustling around.

“Um… Well, I don’t know if it was outside her means…” She suddenly says, sounding surprised.

“What is it?”

“An accessory.”

“An accessory? Was it expensive?”

“It was 30 000 yen… Considering her monthly salary, it seems a little high… I wonder if it was the ring she was wearing when her

body was found."

"...What date did she buy it on?" Sakurako-san asks, sounding a little disappointed.

"Umm…"

She doesn't say anything for a little while.

"Well? What's the date?" Sakurako-san asks in a slightly nicer tone than before.

I hear a sigh from the phone.

"It was just after she left the house… It looks like she bought it at the mall near the station before she headed to Nukabira."

Is that why she said she was running out of time? I ask the mom to send me a picture of the receipt. Sakurako-san looks disappointed when she sees it.

"Does… Does the fact that she bought that mean something?" Kougami asks.

I was thinking the same thing.

"Before committing suicide, many people take extravagant trips or buy expensive items, especially using a credit card. They know that they won't have to pay it off, since they won't be alive anymore."

"Then you mean-"

Sakurako-san doesn't answer my question, but she doesn't really need to. Even though she did make a big purchase, I'm still not sure it was suicide… Sakurako-san's expression is grim as we part ways with Kougami and Azechi, and head back to the parking lot by the station.

I hop into the car and put on my seat belt, but Sakurako-san doesn't start the car.

"Is… Something wrong?"

"No, I'm just wondering why it was a ring. It could have been anything else.

"Maybe she just liked it?"

A 30 000 yen ring is definitely too expensive for a high schooler like me, but I wouldn't exactly call it a luxury item. If she wasn't worried about money, she could have gotten one that was even

more expensive. I can't deny the possibility that she just liked that one, though.

"If you're curious, why not call the store she bought it from? They might have deleted them already, but stores that deal with valuables like that should have security camera footage."

There's no harm in it, so Sakurako-san agrees to give them a call. We give them a simple explanation of the situation, and email them a picture of the receipt to confirm exactly what she bought. I also ask if they have any security camera footage left from that day.

"Oh!" The woman says in surprise a few seconds after opening the email I sent. "I remember now. I think I'm the one who served her. She bought two pinky rings."

"...Pinky rings?" I mumble reflexively.

"Yes, that's right. It's been some time, so unfortunately we don't have the security footage anymore, but I remember her. She was a lovely customer." The employee sounds oddly happy.

"What… Makes you say that?"

"She said she wanted to buy matching rings for her and a friend she hadn't seen in a few years. She told me that she and her friend bought cheap rings from a magazine when they were in middle school, but they took a long time to arrive. She had to transfer schools before they were delivered, so she never got to give it to her friend."

Asuka-san told the clerk that she wanted them to wear matching accessories.

"Listening to her story reminded me of when I was in school, and it got me all excited. She was still trying to choose right up until the last second before her bus left."

The employee suggested she get the pinky rings because she had the same ones with her best friend in school. Asuka-san was happy with that, since it seemed more special than just picking any random thing. The clerk sounds happy, in stark contrast to Sakurako-san and I's stiff expressions.

"The bus… Did she mention which bus she was taking? Or where she was going?"

“Yes, she did. It would have been a long trip. There’s no direct JR line, unfortunately. I’d like to visit Asahikawa once in a while, too.”

Part 11

Sakurako-san calls Aoba-san. After visiting the zoo, he went to the Ayako Miura literature museum. She was an Asahikawa-born author, famous for her story “Freezing Point.” It sounds like he’s been enjoying Asahikawa to its fullest. He was originally planning on staying at Sakurako-san’s house, but he was just thinking of seeing if there were any places to stay in Furano. After we tell him about how Kougami and Azechi helped us find Asuka-san’s social media account, and the story about the pinky rings, he seems to regain his passions for the case.

“Please tell me more,” Aoba-san says.

After meeting up with Aoba-san, we head to Yoriko-san’s father’s house. Of course, he still refuses to see us, but this time, we won’t back down either. Since she can’t kick down the door, Sakurako-san yells through it.

“Asuka Aneha visited you, didn’t she? What did you do to her? Did you drive her away, too?!”

There’s no answer. Sakurako-san continues to yell that she has three things she’s concerned about.

“First, Asuka Aneha bought a ring for her friend. Second, she was concerned about the price. Third, her corpse only had one ring with it!”

Her friend lived in Asahikawa, too. They were so close that they bought matching rings before one of them had to transfer to a different school. The only person it could be is Yoriko-san.

“If she was planning to die, she wouldn’t have cared about the price of the ring. From the way the employee spoke about her, Asuka Aneha didn’t seem to have a grim resolve. In other words, she was going to see her dead best friend. She wasn’t going to die. She just wanted to see her friend!”

The two of them were probably connected through the popular social media post Asuka-san made. However, Yoriko-san had already passed away. So who contacted Asuka-san…

“I imagine that someone pretended to be the dead Yoriko Hoshi to lure out Asuka, and caused her death - but Yoriko was lonely. She stayed at home, and didn’t socialise much, so the culprit must be someone who was close to her,” Sakurako-san says. She leans in closely to the door.

“...Who contacted that girl? You? Your wife?”

There’s no response right away. Soon, I hear a quiet voice on the other side of the door.

“...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the voice replies.

“I see. Your wife must be the culprit, then. Sorry to bother you. We’ll go talk to her, then–”

As soon as Sakurako-san takes a step back, the door is violently flung open. If Sakurako-san had moved any slower, she could have been seriously injured. Aoba-san and I immediately step between Hoshi-san and Sakurako-san to protect her.

“My wife has already suffered enough! Don’t cause her any more pain by bringing up that girl again!” Hoshi-san shouts at us.

“We just want to verify the facts. Asuka Aneha left the jewellery store in Obihiro just before 5pm, saying she was going to be late for the bus. I thought she was going to Nukabira, but that’s not what happened. She was probably taking the Northliner… That is, the intercity express bus to Asahikawa. The last bus that goes through Karikachi is at 5pm.”

“So?! Why are you telling me all this crap that doesn’t matter?!”

“Why are you so emotional? You seem like you’re trying to hide something.”

In contrast to how agitated Hoshi-san is, Sakurako-san speaks with a thin, indifferent smile, further irritating him.

“That girl wasn’t able to drive. If she came all the way out here, she probably would have taken a taxi, unless someone else picked her up. We’ll have to ask around at some taxi companies.

“...”

Hoshi-san falls silent. However, his expression is stern and grim. I can see not just anger, but also something like fear toward Sakurako-san on his face. Eventually, Hoshi-san lets out a long breath, and casts his gaze downward in resignation.

“...You’re right. She came to visit. To see my daughter.” Unable to escape anymore, he speaks with a stiff expression. “But that’s it. I just told her that she committed suicide. That Yoriko died in Nukabira. That the corpse hasn’t been found yet. That’s all. I don’t know what she did after that.”

“Nukabira…?”

Ah, so that's it. I figured she was heading to Sounkyo or Tenninkyo. Nukabira isn’t that far away, but it takes 3 hours by car to get there. That’s further than Sapporo. But now I remember. Masa-chan-san said that someone went missing on a path through the woods several years ago. That might have been Yoriko-san. All the bits and pieces are starting to connect. Asuka-san is connected to Nukabira through Yoriko-san’s death.

“That’s all I have to say. Leave,” Hoshi-san says rudely.

He tries to close the door, but Aoba-san puts his foot in the way.

“What did you think?”

“...About what?”

“How did you feel when the woman responsible for your daughter’s death showed up on your doorstep? Did you forgive her?” Aoba-san asks.

I can’t see his expression through his glasses, but I’m certain that he’s angry.

“Y-you must be joking!” Hoshi-san immediately explodes with anger. “I could never forgive her! She destroyed my family!”

“It… It wasn’t Asuka-san’s fault!” I shout, unable to hold myself back any longer.

How dare he shift the blame when he’s the one who couldn’t protect his daughter?!

“She betrayed Yoriko! Yoriko died because that woman left her behind. It's the same as if she’d killed Yoriko herself! How could I ever forgive her?!”

“Is that why you killed her?” Sakurako-san asks coldly.

Hoshi-san instantly freezes in place.

“...What did you just say?”

“I mean, you said you’d never forgive her. You said you consider her to have killed your daughter. Did you want revenge?”

“No… I didn’t kill her. Honest.” Hoshi-san’s voice is trembling. He frantically shakes his head.

“You keep changing your story. Tell me the truth. Was everything you said a lie?”

“I didn’t lie! I didn’t kill her!”

Hoshi-san angrily slams his fist on the door frame.

“I didn’t… She asked me to take her to Nukabira, where Yoriko went missing. All I did was drive her there.”

Hoshi-san’s voice is hoarse, like he’s finally admitting his guilt. I can see sweat shining on his forehead.

“...Isn’t that what you’d call ‘willful negligence’? Even if you didn’t hurt her yourself, you had reason to think she might die!”

“She didn’t listen to me when I told her she was dressed too lightly! I told her I’d wait until she was done, but she told me I could just leave, so I did. I had no reason to wait, and I thought she’d just stay at the hot spring when she was done.”

Fortunately, there was no need to worry about bears at that time of year.

“I did think she was in a bit of danger,” Hoshi-san says bitterly. “I can’t say it didn’t worry me, but… I thought it would be good for her to come face to face with my daughter’s death. I thought that maybe it would help Yoriko rest easy.”

Hoshi-san lets out a long, deep sigh as he admits that it’s his fault.

“Is what I did a crime?” he asks us.

“I couldn’t follow her with my car. She walked into the forest of her own free will. I didn’t force her to do anything. She died because of her own doing.”

I remember seeing that there was a gate blocking the entrance to the forest. He couldn’t have driven after her, even if he wanted to. He would have had to walk with her all the way into the forest, or carry her on his back. She didn’t have enough drugs or alcohol in her system to render her unconscious, though.

“...If that’s all, then go away.”

He must have been worried that if he told all of this to the police, he would be charged with abandonment resulting in death or injury. But… Asuka-san wasn't a child. If she chose to kill herself, there isn't a lot Hoshi-san could have done to stop her. But still…

Sakurako-san silently stares at Hoshi-san for a moment, then drops her gaze.

"I understand. Sorry to bother you," she says as she signals us to leave.

He may not be a murderer, but I don't think he's completely innocent, either. I can't accept this. Sakurako-san pushes my back to get me to start walking. Ah, it's starting to rain again.

Once we get back to the car, my body starts to feel strangely heavy.

"...I guess this is the end, this time," I mutter.

I watch the raindrops drip onto the windshield, and draw their squiggly lines down the glass. Aoba-san sighs from the back seat.

"But… Even if she did commit suicide, we still don't know who called her to Asahikawa in the first place."

"There's also the suicide note she sent. We can't rule out the possibility that she intended to die from the start."

"Even though she bought a ring to give to her friend?"

Isn't that a contradiction?

"Maybe she just wanted to see her friend one last time? Or maybe she didn't want to die while still regretting that they never made up."

"Maybe I'm overthinking this, but… Were those emails really supposed to be a suicide note?"

"What?"

"Maybe she really just wanted to thank her mom and Yuka-san."

They seemed like they were just nice messages.

"Then how do you explain the one she sent to Kikuchi?"

"She could have meant that she was going to be reborn. Maybe she meant that she was going to meet her old friend, turn over a new leaf, and become a new person?"

It reminds me of my own suicide note. Hanabusa almost used it against me. If you looked at it differently, it could be interpreted to mean I was confessing my guilt.

“I think she sent that email because she wanted to start over, and make Kikuchi-san happy this time. Asuka-san didn’t want to break up with him.”

So she sent that email to her significant other while on the bus to Asahikawa. She must have been anxious about meeting Yoriko-san. But she didn’t want to give in to her weakness anymore, so she had to use strong language to rally her courage and push forward.

“...But I don’t think we can really pursue this any further.”

In the end, this is all just my imagination. So many questions still remain. We still can’t hear Asuka-san’s voice.

“No, there’s still more to do,” Sakurako-san boldly says from the driver’s seat.

“There is?”

“Yeah.”

His excellency, Diavel, shouts as she starts the car’s engine. Oddly enough, it’s DOKURO, Sakurako-san’s favourite.

“What are you going to do?” Aoba-san asks. I can see his confused expression in the rearview mirror.

Sakurako-san is smiling widely.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s time for fieldwork, everyone’s favourite.”

Part 12

The next morning the sky is clear and blue, just as the forecast predicted. The temperature will get up to 22 degrees in Asahikawa today, making the last day of the consecutive holidays perfect for leisure activities. Sakurako-san, Aoba-san, and I are walking through the forest trail near Taushubetsu with Tsuyama-san, the nature guide who helped us last time.

“I helped with the search back then, too. It was during a time when the bears were particularly active. The weather was terrible for several days in a row until the search was called off after a week,” Tsuyama-san says, talking about the search when Yoriko-san went missing four years ago.

“Well… It’s different if someone is genuinely lost, but if they go in with the intention of committing suicide, it can be really difficult to find them,” Tsuyama-san says.

The main reason people get lost in the woods is because of animal trails. Animals may appear to walk around freely in nature, but in reality, they’re just like humans and choose the path that’s easiest to walk through. Once a spot has been travelled on repeatedly, people can mistake them for paths intended for human use. They end up wandering into the wild and by the time they realise something is wrong, they don’t know where they are anymore. However if someone goes out with the intention of dying, they won’t necessarily follow a path.

“Honestly, we only did a full day search for one day because the parents had already given up.”

“They gave up?” Sakurako-san raises her eyebrow.

“Yes, though I wonder why… The mom was really quiet the whole time… The parents didn’t seem to get along very well. She didn’t seem like she wanted to be around him. I don’t know if it’s because she wasn’t interested, or if she had already given up, but she seemed really unemotional.”

The father, on the other hand, was completely distraught. He was told it was dangerous, but he still joined the front lines of the search for his daughter. Suddenly, I hear a hooting sound.

“Oh, an owl.”

Tsuyama-san stops and looks around, then points at one tree in particular. I look to the tree, and see the fluffy white owl squinting at us.

“It’s an ural owl . Their call sounds like ‘ gorosuke hohho .’ The Ainu people say that they’re saying ‘pewrep cikoyki niorpok sike ociw.’ They believe that the owl is telling them where there are bear cubs, and that you’ll have a good hunt if you go there.”

“B-bear cubs…?” I echo.

“Oh, but we shouldn’t see any at this time of year.”

“But these days, some of the young males don’t hibernate in winter,” Sakurako-san says with a grin just to scare me.

“I… I’m actually scared, so please don’t do that. Damage from large animals makes it hard to do an autopsy,” Aoba-san says with a stiff expression.

There’s a lot to unpack there, but I definitely don’t want to think about myself getting autopsied. If there really is a bear out there, it’s best if we make a lot of noise. We hurry along, trying to talk as loud as possible. We’re almost at the spot where we found Asuka-san’s body.

“...It would be nice if she actually just ran away… Like the aunt in the story the innkeeper told us.”

But I know real life doesn’t work that way. This is where the god of the mountains lives. Asuka-san’s body wasn’t too far from the parking lot. It feels like we walked pretty far, though.

“Why… Did she die here?” Sakurako-san mumbles to herself.

“Maybe because it’s an open space?”

Asuka-san should have had all of her belongings with her, but the police never found any alcohol or beta blockers with her. The police already looked around, but the four of us decide to look even further. We walk around for nearly an hour. In the end, we don’t find any sign of any drugs or alcohol.

“You can’t transport liquids without some kind of container… And bottles don’t move on their own.”

Sakurako-san sighs.

There’s still the possibility that she drank somewhere else and threw the bottle away, like on her way out here. Or even while riding in Hoshi-san’s car.

“...”

It’s still too early to draw any conclusions. We silently continue the search. Just as the cold starts to seep into my bones, I find something other than a rock under a withered bamboo leaf.

“...”

It’s not a medicine bottle. It’s an opaque, dark brown lump. I pick it up. It’s light, but it’s not wood.

“S… Sakurako-san!” I scream.

“What happened?”

Sakurako-san rushes over to me. As soon as she sees what I'm holding, she suddenly sounds excited. I'm holding her favourite thing in the whole world, the essence of life. A lower jaw bone. I thought it might belong to some kind of animal, but it definitely has a chin. Humans are the only mammals with a chin bone like this.

"Let's search this area more thoroughly. It looks like this person has been dead for several years - probably around 3," Aoba-san says while he examines the bone that Sakurako-san is now holding.

We carefully check under each leaf, dig through the leaf litter, and sift through the wet dirt. After about 10 minutes, we find several weathered pieces of a skull.

"There is almost no wear on the enamel. It's hard to say for sure, but this person was probably in their late teens or early 20s," Aoba-san says while he examines the remaining teeth on the jaw bone.

"The jaw is one of the easiest bones to use to determine the sex of a skeleton. Boy, care to hazard a guess?" Sakurako-san suddenly asks me.

"Do you know the characteristics to look for?" Aoba-san gently asks.

I nod.

"...A woman's jaw is more delicate in appearance than a man's. The angle of the mandible is often rounder in women, while a man's is more square and rugged."

"That's right. Men also have a flatter chin, while a woman's is curved." Sakurako-san nods and holds the bone out to me. "So which is it? Curved, or flat?"

"...It's definitely curved. This probably belonged to a woman. If Aoba-san's estimate is correct, she was a woman around 20 years old."

I can't believe I've gotten to the point where we're using actual corpses as teaching materials. I'm fully aware that we're hindering the police's investigation, but that doesn't stop us from looking at the bones. It's strange how intellectual curiosity can drive us this far.

"One more thing… Do you know what bone this is? It looks similar to the greek letter upsilon."

Sakurako-san holds out a small, cracked, U shaped object.

I know this one. As his excellency Diavel says, it's the "crown of the Adam's apple." Humans have a butterfly behind their eyes, and an "Eden" in their throats. The laryngeal prominence is a protrusion in the cartilage in the throat, named after Adam from the bible. And the bone positioned over that apple is–

"It's a hyoid bone."

A U shaped bone whose name literally means "bone that's shaped like the letter upsilon."

"This bone is located deep under the lower jaw, so it's normally difficult to break. But look here. This bone is definitely broken. What can we infer from this?"

Aoba-san and Sakurako-san's gazes fall on me. Feeling of pressure, sadness, and anger all stir in my mind, but I force myself to remain calm. I've seen this situation with this bone in the past. In that abandoned house when Sakurako-san dug up a secret from beneath the ground.

"This area fractures when a third party violently strangles the neck."

Both of them nod, indicating I got the right answer. I don't know if it's the relief or the shock, but my knees feel weak.

"Ow!"

When I kneel on the ground, a hard object digs into my kneecap. When I pick it up, I find that it's a brand new, very tiny ring.

Part 13

Aoba-san will take care of everything around reporting this to the police.

"You've been studying well," he praises me as we're parting ways.

I could never forget the knowledge I've gained from an actual corpse like that. Leaving everything up to Aoba-san, Sakurako-san and I head back to Asahikawa. Then, we head to Higashikagura-cho where Hoshi-san lives.

"Tell us about the time your daughter disappeared."

“You again…” He says in a fed up voice when he opens the door.

“What do you…”

“When your daughter ran away, didn’t you go after her?”

“O-Of course I did! But it was dark, and I didn’t know where she went. I was hoping she’d come back soon…”

“Didn’t you think that she was in danger because of the brown bears in that mountain? Why didn’t you report it right away? You should have searched for her right away.”

“Well…”

Hoshi-san can’t find the words to say in response to Sakurako-san rapidly pressing him with questions.

“...We found a woman’s bones earlier. A skull. It’s quite far from the inn. Moreover, it’s close to where Asuka Aneha was found.”

“Huh?”

“Here, look,” Sakurako-san says, then silently holds a small, white fragment in front of Hoshi-san’s face.

“Eek!”

He has to grab the door to stop himself from falling over from shock.

“Th… That can’t be a bone. It must be a rock or an antler…”

“It’s actually quite easy to tell if it’s a bone or not. Just lick it. If it’s smooth, that means it’s a rock. A bone will stick to your tongue because they’re porous.”

“L-lick it?”

“Yes, of course. It’s a very sensual feeling. It’s irresistible,” Sakurako-san says with a big smile on her face. She looks down at the bone lovingly.

“S-stop it!”

Hoshi-san runs out of patience, and snatches the bone from Sakurako-san’s hand.

“...Why? Why don’t you want it to be a human bone? Shouldn’t you be happy if it turns out to be your daughter’s? You’ve been looking for her all this time… Surely you want to know what happened to her.”

“It… It probably isn’t her’s. It must be from a fox or a deer.”

Sakurako-san sighs.

“Unfortunately for you, it couldn’t be either of those. This bone is from the clavicle. In most quadrupedal mammals, the clavicle is reduced or absent.”

“T-then what about a bear?!”

“That is a possibility, but the neck bones we found with it showed signs of strangulation. What kind of animal could strangle a bear?”

“Strangulation…?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. You seem to be in denial. Well… As her father, I’m sure you don’t like the idea that your daughter ran away from the inn only for her body to be found strangled to death quite far away.”

Sakurako-san laughs as Hoshi-san shakes his head with a tense expression.

“...After she left the inn, some pervert must have caught and killed her. A pervert with your daughter…?! How tragic!”

I can’t believe it. Suicide is sad, but I can’t imaging how it feels to know your daughter was assaulted before being murdered!

“I lost everything because of Yoriko!” Hoshi-san raises his voice to talk over me. “I’m the real victim. The school, Yoriko’s friends, my wife, and Yoriko herself… They ruined my life! Even though my daughter was crying every day, the school did nothing to help or stop the other kids. Her only friend that would listen ran away,” Hoshi-san shouts. He bites his lip in frustration.

“Even if they were kids, they’re still people. Do you think it’s that easy to control other people? Do you think the teachers were magicians? Asuka’s mother realised that, and rescued her daughter before it could get any worse.”

“She didn’t ‘save’ her! She’s a coward who ran away without putting up a fight!”

“There’s nothing wrong with running away! Herbivores are amazingly fast so they can escape from predators with claws and fangs! Living things are designed to run away so they can live to see another day. Running away is the strongest instinct humans have!”

Sakurako-san slams her fist on the door, causing Hoshi-san to fall down. The force she used makes me feel uneasy, so I gently grab her sleeve.

“...You forced your daughter to fight for her life. You’re the one who wouldn’t help her.”

Sakurako-san looks at me and nods, then tries to suppress her emotions by using a quieter tone. Hoshi-san frantically shakes his head.

“That’s not true. I didn’t force her to do anything… She actually wanted to die. She was weak, so I was just trying to make her stronger-”

“...That’s exactly why Yoriko attacked her bullies. Their wounds were shallow because she didn’t really want to fight back! She was scared of you most of all, because you wouldn’t accept her weakness.”

If Yoriko-san had attacked them out of anger and hatred, their wounds would have been much deeper. Yoriko-san couldn’t bring herself to hurt them.

“You drove Yoriko-san into a corner and killed her.”

“I didn’t! It was her decision! Her friend decided on her own, too! I just made it easier!”

“So you strangled your daughter?”

“I was only trying to convince her… No, that’s not true. I had nothing to do with her death… I don’t know anything about it.”

“In that case, why was Asuka’s ring next to the skeleton? She bought a matching set to share with Yoriko.”

“That’s ridiculous! How could she know where Yoriko’s body was? She was at the dam-” Hoshi-san starts to say, then suddenly looks at us.

“Is that so? I’m sure the police will have something to say about that,” Sakurako-san says.

She takes my phone out of her pocket. It’s been on speaker mode the whole time.

“I think it would be for the best if you told them everything…”

In an instant, Utsumi-san pulls into the parking lot, along with his fellow officers. Hoshi-san falls to his knees, stunned.

Final Part

As Utsumi-san takes Hoshi-san away, Sakurako-san asks him, “are you a butterfly? What name were you given?”

“What are you talking about?” He asks back. He seems to genuinely not understand what she means.

Sakurako-san sighs and mutters, “ugh, a dud. This was a waste of time.”

“Please don’t say that. At least we helped someone, right?” I say.

I’m not sure exactly who we helped at this point, though.

“Geez… I wish I’d taken a few of the girl’s bones. Given the state she was in, I don’t think anyone would have noticed.”

Sakurako-san lets out a great big sigh and slumps her shoulders.

“No! Don’t say that! At least you got your brown bear bones, right?”I say, laughing.

The piece of bone she’s holding is actually from that bear skeleton.

“By the way… Is what you said about licking bones true?” I ask as Sakurako-san rolls the bone around in her hand.

“It is!” She says with an innocent, child-like grin.

Her tongue shines captivatingly behind her lips. I can’t bring myself to ask how often she licks them.

So, it was proven that Asuka-san and Yoriko-san’s deaths were not suicides, but murders. Four years ago Hoshi-san got into an argument with his daughter, and since he was intoxicated, he found himself strangling her before he knew it. He then took her body and dumped it in the reservoir off the end of the trail through the woods. After hearing that the water might run dry, he got worried that Yoriko-san’s body would be discovered, but it never was.

He performed the role of the loving father who’s desperately searching for his daughter. His wife said she felt uncomfortable around her husband. She tearfully confessed that she felt the same as him, but felt guilty that she was never there for her daughter.

As for Asuka-san, while he didn't directly kill her, he did pretend to be his daughter to lure her out, then drugged her and left her alone in the forest. At first, he just wanted to make her apologise. But when Hoshi-san saw on social media that the person who abandoned his daughter was living a carefree life and getting sympathy from tens of thousands of people, he was enraged. He thought that was wrong. Even though he's the one that killed his own daughter, he still keeps claiming that her death and his crimes are the fault of everyone around him.

Asuka-san was a victim of that distorted man. She was in despair after finding out her best friend had died after going missing in Nukabira. She was in tears, apologising to her friend's father over and over again, since she was unable to apologise to Yoriko-san herself.

It was Hoshi-san who told her, "in that case, tell her in a dream."

He offered her a drug that would let her control her dreams. Using the medicine, she could meet with Yoriko-san. He prepared alcohol and beta blockers. He told her to drink it in the place where Yoriko-san died, and left her in the cold. He set everything up to hurt her both physically and mentally.

"If you think about it, no normal person would take medicine they were offered so obediently like that," Hoshi-san said.

Yet she did as she was told, and desperately drank the strong alcohol with the medicine it shouldn't be taken with. Unaware that it was due to the medicine, Asuka-san started saying she didn't feel well as they went to the reservoir where Hoshi-san left her all alone.

"I didn't intend to kill her. I just wanted to punish her a bit to make her realise what she's done."

He said he meant to go back for her soon, but even if he had, what he did to her would have come to light. It shouldn't have been a lethal dose, but it's enough that she would probably have to go to the hospital, which would become a problem. With all those thoughts rushing through his head, he made a decision. The decision not to go back for her, that is. It would be fine. Nobody ever found his

daughter, and there were no witnesses. He figured that she deserved to die, so he wasn't doing anything wrong.

Of course, nobody agrees with his selfish viewpoint. I heard that the police are investigating if he planned to murder her, since he had visited websites with instructions on using beta blockers as a suicide or murder method. They're still deciding whether he'll serve a very long prison sentence, or give him the death penalty.

But… Is that really for the best? What Hoshi-san did was absolutely unforgivable, but what about the people who drove Yoriko-san and Asuka-san into a corner? Are they really not considered guilty? Who is Asuka-san's family supposed to hate? I'm not sure who the real evil is here. Some kids didn't like them when they were young. Maybe there's no way to stop that from happening. Some people seem to forget that you should never hurt someone else.

Just like that, the case of the two women who suffered from their pasts comes to a close. Their deaths were not suicide, but something bothers me, just a bit. Asuka-san wanted to commit suicide so badly, so wouldn't she have known about the drug beforehand? She wasn't a child. No, even a child would be wary in that situation. No one in their right mind would take such a sketchy drug. Did she mean to die in the dark of winter, surrounded by nightmares? In the past, she had problems with sleepwalking and nightmares. I'm sure she knew what kinds of dreams she would have. Reenacting painful memories. Reliving past trauma. But Yoriko-san would be there, too.

'I wanted to see you.'

Asuka-san must have felt hopeless after learning that her best friend had passed away. She decided that she would prefer to see her friend in her nightmares, rather than in the middle of the woods, and drank the medicine. That was her one and only wish. To see her friend again, and apologise.

What did Asuka-san think about while she was in the freezing cold, pitch black woods? Despair? Resignation? A desire to live? A later investigation revealed that she died next to Yoriko-san's remains, but an animal dragged her to the spot where we found her.

We'll never know if Asuka-san found Yoriko-san's skull while walking through the animal trails. Maybe she just happened to stop there. Only the owls that watched her that night know the truth. After erasing the history on her phone, she went to sleep. Ashamed of sin that she'll never be able to redeem herself from. Trying to erase her past self who betrayed her friend. Then, her life ended with nightmares, surrounded by the calls of Kunnerekkamuy - ural owls.

Even though her cause of death has been discovered, she won't return to her family. The only difference between suicide and murder is the target of her family's hatred. Which is more difficult, I wonder? Hating yourself, or hating someone else for the rest of your life? After hearing the whole truth, Asuka-san's mom, Kikuchi-san, and Yuka-san are even sadder than when I first met them. I'd be lying if I said I didn't regret seeing them like that. But we definitely got to hear the last words of those two women who died far too young. I like to think that we freed them from regret.

And so, I return to my everyday life.

"It would be faster if we found another body."

Sakurako-san mutters while she watches the snow fall on the garden. I'm sitting in the living room with her, drinking tea and petting Hector.

"What's wrong with you? How could you say that?"

I know she's getting impatient because Hanabusa wasn't involved with this incident, but I can't let her get away with saying morbid stuff like that.

"If we let things continue as they are, doesn't that mean we're letting him control us like pawns? I don't want to keep losing to him. Well, I don't particularly mind if it's just heinous criminals killing each other. If what he's doing is really going to benefit society, I wouldn't

mind cooperating in some cases… For a price, of course. If he has the sphenoid bone, then I could have… The hyoid bone."

"...Sakurako-san?"

I'm horrified. I look up to see her gently stroking her throat with her fingertip. No matter what the price… I don't think Sakurako-san would actually help him.

"You… You're joking, right?"

No, there's no way she's serious. There's no way. She suddenly starts laughing like she's possessed.

She glares at the window and says, "I hate winter. It's boring. Fieldwork is difficult, and it's dangerous to go into the mountains during hunting season."

Hokkaido has long winters. It must feel like an eternity to her, since she can't work outside. She ends up trapped in this quiet house.

"Sometimes I get so bored that reason goes out the window. I might jump at the chance to do anything, as long as it's interesting."

"Well… You still can't do that!" I say, and tell her I'll come here every day if she's bored.

I have to study anyway, and I can invite Kougami and the others sometimes. Then when I need to take a break, she can tell me all about her bone collection.

"So please… Don't even joke about that again. It's not right. That should be one of your personal rules."

Right. Sakurako Kujou-san's game master is, and will always be, Sakurako-san herself.

"Next time you say something like that, I'll tell Gran, Ariwara-san, and even Shouko-san about it," I say threateningly.

"What's wrong?" Gran asks as she comes out of the kitchen where she's been making apple pie. She's surprised to see us in such a tense atmosphere.

"Nothing… It just smells so good that she was asking if she could have my portion, too."

"You've been eating too many sweets lately! It'll be too late to regret it when you get sick!"

As Gran starts to scold us, Sakurako-san glares at me with resentment in her eyes. I'm fine with letting her get scolded today. It's absolutely not okay to think like that. After receiving an earful, Sakurako-san slumps down in her chair to pet Hector, who's whiter than the snow. The same colour as the trees still are. Only for a little longer, though.

"Even I… Make the wrong choice sometimes."

Sakurako-san murmurs unexpectedly. I don't know if she's referring to the present, or things that will happen in the future. I'm too scared to ask her.

Epilogue

Aoba-san came to visit me at the start of December, just before the snow started to pile up. During my parent-teacher interview, they said I had to narrow down my university choices, so I asked Aoba-san for advice. He was delighted to get the opportunity. I want to consult him about my future career, but I've also grown to like him over the 3 days we spent investigating Asuka-san's death. I've even decided to invite him to my usual tea shop. Now I understand why Sakurako-san can declare so confidently that Aoba-san is safe.

"Really? Did you get in trouble with the university?"

"Yeah. Well, it was my current professor that was mad at me, to be exact. I can't just do whatever I want."

Even if it was "outside the scope of his duties," two crimes were solved thanks to him "doing whatever he wants." They shouldn't be angry… He should be praised for what he did.

"Well… I'm sorry for getting you wrapped up in all of that."

"Oh, no, it's fine. Besides… It made me feel like I need to take my work more seriously. I'm actually glad that I went."

I recall hearing before that Aoba-san doesn't get along very well with his current professor. I hope this doesn't make work uncomfortable for him…

“Your professor is pretty nasty, right? That’s no good… I was considering going there…”

“My university…? You’ll have to keep working hard, then.”

“But… I haven’t completely decided yet. I want to stay in Asahikawa, but my brother says I should go to school outside of Hokkaido…”

It’s already winter of my second year in high school. Up until a year ago, I was planning to become a civil servant, so my sudden change of heart has caused problems for the adults in my life. My mom told me yesterday that if I’m serious about this, I should go to cram school or hire a private tutor. That’s why I want to decide which university to go to.

Aoba-san kindly explains which universities have a forensic medicine program, and what information he knows about each one. We end up so engrossed in our conversation, that I forget to be careful not to disturb the other customers at the store. One of the two women sitting next to us clears her throat to let me know. I smile sheepishly at her and fall silent.

Aoba-san’s warm ruhuna tea fogs up his glasses. Today is the coldest day of the season. Small snowflakes gently flutter around outside. Aoba-san is drinking his tea without any milk. The blood-red tea sways around in his white cup. I suddenly feel anxious.

“Um… Could I ask you about one more thing?”

“What is it?”

“It’s… About Sakurako-san.”

Aoba-san instantly looks nervous. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

“She seems… Weird lately. Well, being weird is normal for her, but… Well… Sometimes it feels like she’s becoming more like Hanabusa.”

“...”

Aoba-san’s eyes are wide. He looks scared.

“Recently, she’s been saying more positive things about him… And something that has been worrying me for a long time is that Sakurako-san might be more similar to Hanabusa than she is to us.”

“Sometimes I get so bored that reason goes out the window. I might jump at the chance to do anything, as long as it’s interesting.”

Sakurako-san said that to me while I was having tea at her house. Hanabusa casts a strong shadow over my life, but to Sakurako-san, that’s “exciting.” I’ve always thought of her as someone who never changes, but what if I’m wrong about that…? “Although Hanabusa hasn’t hurt Sakurako-san, he has made me uncomfortable numerous times. He even tried to steal away my friend. Sakurako-san seems to think it’s exciting, like a game, but someday-”

I’m too scared to finish that thought.

“...Stayed away.” Aoba-san mutters, breaking his long silence.

“Pardon?”

“It would be best if you stayed away from her.”

“But that would scare me even more. If something happened to her…”

“It won’t. He won’t hurt her. You’re the one who’s in danger,” Aoba-san says flatly.

“It’s true that an ordinary person like me is powerless against Hanabusa, but that doesn’t mean I should stay away from Sakurako-san, does it?”

“...Yes, it does. ‘He’ is only after the white butterfly. You’re nothing more than a corydalis fumariifolia for the snow apollo to pupate upon,” he says quietly.

I don’t understand what he means at first. No, surely I misheard him.

“What do you… Mean?”

“That’s enough. You don’t need to know anything more than that. For the sake of yourself and the people precious to you, stay away from her.”

“But Hanabusa-”

“Stop. Quit sticking your nose into this!” Aoba-san says in a forceful tone.

The table shakes, causing his cup to bleed.

“Aoba… San?”

“Once she pupates, all we have to do is wait for her to emerge. Just leave him to do as he pleases. If you promise never to speak to her again, I’ll make sure he doesn’t hurt you.”

What is Aoba-san talking about? Who is “he”? No, who is this person in front of me, anyway? Where is the gentle, sad person who is fighting between life and death?

“What do you mean, ‘hurt me’?! What are you talking about!”

I stand up from my chair, trying to shake off the gazes of the people around me. A dark flame flickers behind Aoba-san’s glasses.

“I’m talking about the future, of course.”

Eyes the colour of night gaze up at me curiously.

“Right. This is about the future. Sakurako Kujou is a monster. If she becomes a forensic pathologist, she’ll surpass even Professor Shitara. However, her and Professor Shitara are fundamentally different. She’s more of a ‘monster’ than a ‘god’. She doesn’t love humans- but you are different,”

Aoba-san as he slowly stands up from his chair. He gently grabs me by my shoulders as I try to back away, pushing me back into my seat. He leans in close to my ear and whispers,

“You truly are a hybrid of Sakurako Kujou and Professor Shitara.”

He gives me a chillingly kind smile as I’m still shocked. He fills my cup with that blood coloured tea, and offers it to me.

“I’ve been waiting for Professor Shitara to come back for so long. He doesn’t have long left, though. You were born to be his replacement. That’s why I could never let an apparition like that kill you. You’re safe, I guarantee it.”

He speaks in a calm, mild tone while sipping from his cup of tea with a smile. There’s no sign on his face that he’s lying, making it even more frightening. Who is this person sitting in front of me?

“Aoba-san… What do you know about Hanabusa?”

He doesn’t answer the question.

“Then, are you…?”

My whole body is trembling. Hanabusa has many butterflies, or more accurately, criminals.

“No, I’m not a butterfly. He’s just… someone I know.”

He denies it, but his speech alone is enough to terrify me.

“You know Hanabusa? So you know who he really is?!”

“No. It’s not like that. He’s a phantom.”

“A phantom…?”

“Yes, a phantom. Hanabusa is no longer- he died on September 14th.”

Special short story: Sleeping Plant Bulb

When I was in my first year of high school, I still only had a rough idea of what career I was interested in, but I was supposed to dedicate my whole time in high school aiming toward a career I decided on. When people asked me, “what do you want to do?” I didn’t know how to answer. My tennis skills hadn’t been improving as much as I’d hoped, and I had to make a decision, so I decided to pursue a career in nursing. I had to help take care of my grandpa, and atone for what I did to my grandma.

But when my third year was fast approaching, and people around me kept talking about my “future,” reality hit and I hesitated. Do I really want to go into nursing? If you were to ask me if I want to do it, I’d say no. It’s not my dream. But when someone asks me what I *do* want to do, my mind goes blank and I panic. No matter how much I panicked, I couldn’t come up with an answer. Before I knew it, I was the last person in the classroom who couldn’t decide on a career path. Isozaki-sensei told me to stay behind today, on the first Friday of December. He said it was to help clean the classroom, but I think it was really just to talk about my future.

“Why did you decide to become a teacher?” I ask while I wipe down the blackboard.

Isozaki-sensei is picking withered leaves off a cyclamen by the window.

“Hmm… Why do you want to know?”

“Just… For reference.”

To be honest, I don’t think his answer will actually be helpful. I’m just a little curious, is all.

“…My older siblings are both girls, so I was supposed to take over the family business. I absolutely didn’t want to. The most realistic option for me was teaching. It’s a respectable profession that would be easy to convince my parents to accept.” After thinking for a bit, he finally tells me. “That wasn’t helpful, was it?”

True, his situation is pretty different from mine.

“But… I thought about it, but I really didn’t want to be a teacher. I don’t think I’m cut out for it, either.”

“…”

I don’t think that’s something he should be saying to one of his students… But for some reason, he doesn’t seem unfit to be a teacher. Even today, I was so anxious about discussing my future that I couldn’t speak. He had me stay here after class under the pretext of cleaning to help me relax so I could open up. Some of the inconspicuous spots in the classroom are quite dirty, though.

“A teacher, huh…”

I’ve never thought about being a teacher, and it seems difficult, but it’s also a stable job… I stop wiping the blackboard and groan.

The classroom door opens with a loud bang. I nearly jump out of my skin, but when I turn around, I see a familiar person with beautiful, black hair.

“S-Sakurako-san?!”

She has long, slender limbs and a nice butt. Although she’s feminine and delicate, she’s dignified and has no weaknesses.

“What are you… How did you get in here?” Sensei says with a stern expression.

“I’m an alumnus. Plus I fixed all the specimens in the science room. I come to check on them every now and then,” Sakurako-san says, puffing out her chest with pride.

“Good, at least you used the front door… I can never be too sure with you…”

“Did you really think I snuck in through the back door?”

“If you wanted to, I’m sure you could break through any security.”

No matter how she acts, it’s not like she’s a giant monster who tears down doors. No matter how skilled she is, even Sakurako-san would get found out if she snuck in, so it makes sense that she would use a more appropriate method of getting in here.

“What exactly do you guys think of me? Anyway, I’m here for you today, Isozaki.”

Sakurako-san gives us both a puzzled look. She points at Isozaki-sensei, who is leaning on the window. He tilts his head to the side, surprised to suddenly near his name.

“Yes, you. We need to talk,” Sakurako-san says curtly.

She pulls up the nearest chair, even though I just lined up all the desks so their corners were in line. She plops herself down and crosses her legs. Isozaki-sensei doesn’t move, though. He just keeps leaning against the window.

“Isozaki-“

“… Kujou-san , you should have been disciplined by that old lady, but it seems you still don’t know how to speak politely to other people.”

Sakurako-san impatiently tries to call him again, but Isozaki-sensei immediately starts to scold her. Sakurako-san looks clearly annoyed. She sighs.

“…I would like to talk to you. Could you please take a seat?”

Isozaki-sensei won’t move from the window, no matter how irritated Sakurako-san gets, so she resigns herself to speaking as politely as possible.

“Is that good enough?”

Sensei gives her an insincere smile. Instead of sitting at the seat across from her, he leans against the podium diagonally in front of her.

“Uh…”

He’s getting in the way of my blackboard cleaning.

“It doesn’t really matter, Yuriko. This doesn’t need to be private.”

Sakurako-san doesn't seem to care, so I look at Isozaki-sensei for his opinion. He shrugs, as if to say, "sure, why not?" I turn my back to them and continue wiping the blackboard, even though I've already wiped it thoroughly by now.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"It's about Shoutarou."

I think this is the first time I've ever heard Sakurako-san call Tatewaki-kun by his name.

"What about him?"

"His future. It looks like he still hasn't decided on a university. He seems particularly torn about whether he should move outside of Asahikawa or not. I'd like to say something to him about it, but I've never lived outside of this city, myself. I can't understand how it feels to leave your hometown."

"…"

Sakurako-san speaks to Isozaki-sensei in a very serious tone. My chest feels tight as I listen to how concerned and emotional they are about Tatewaki-kun's future, as if they're his family or something.

"So you came to ask me about it? All on your own?"

"Yes, that's correct. You're his homeroom teacher, and you're from Sapporo, right?"

"I was born in Otaru. I moved to Sapporo after my mother's divorce… At some point, it's not unusual or hard to move away from your parents and hometown."

Isozaki-sensei gives the ice queen, a woman unfazed by anything, a slightly cold smile after watching her asking him with such concern. Perhaps he's trying to tell her she's being overprotective. However, Sakurako-san's worried expression doesn't change. Isozaki-sensei lets out a small sigh, as if he's saying "it can't be helped."

"As for Shoutarou in particular, he's able to do household chores, and his mother has enough financial leeway that he can expect to receive an allowance from her while he attends school. While I wouldn't say he's particularly diligent, he has a sense of

purpose, and is able to put in the effort required. His manner of living isn't bad, either. Honestly, I'm not worried about him leaving home."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. It's 100 times easier than leaving you alone," Isozaki-sensei says with a laugh.

Even though she should be angry that he said something rude, Sakurako-san puts her hands together, looking relieved.

"I see… So that's how it is…"

"Does that give you some peace of mind?"

"Yeah… I'm surprised, though. I still think of that boy as a child…" Sakurako-san murmurs.

I'm filled with the feeling like I want to run away from here, even though I haven't decided on a career path yet. Suddenly, Isozaki-sensei bursts out laughing.

"…What are you laughing about?" Sakurako-san glares at the teacher, clearly offended.

"No… It's nothing. I just realized that you don't know everything, after all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Isozaki-sensei can't help but keep laughing at whatever it is he's finding so funny. Sakurako-san stares at him, confused, then looks to me for help.

"Huh? Um… Well, it's just… He and I are both high school students already…"

I know what Isozaki-sensei wants to say, but I find it difficult to bring myself to say it. Sakurako-san nods meekly at my hesitant answer.

"You're right… It's not that I think of him as a replacement for my brother, but I've been watching him grow all this time, so I worry that he'll be lonely or worried."

"He will be lonely," Isozaki-sensei says. "It's a fact of life. He's always had people around him, so once he's out on his own, he'll definitely get lonely."

Isozaki-sensei is basically affirming Sakurako-san's worries. The crease between her eyebrows gets deeper.

“I have three siblings - two older sisters and a younger brother. When I first left home, I was surprised at how quiet it was, and happy to finally have some peace and quiet.”

Imai-kun has two older sisters, too, and he also has a strangely feminine side. I’m not surprised to hear sensei has older sisters, considering his girl power. I had no idea Isozaki-sensei had so many siblings. He seems more like an only child.

“Don’t worry… He’ll definitely do well. The worst that’ll happen is that he’ll stress himself out trying to handle everything perfectly.”

Sensei notices that I’m wringing out my wet cloth, and hands me a clean, dry cloth.

“Yuriko, go hang out with him sometimes so he can let off steam, even after you graduate.”

“Hm? Oh, okay… A-as long as Tatewaki-kun doesn’t mind…”

I’m surprised that I’m suddenly being spoken to. To be honest… When I hang out with Tatewaki-kun , I’m usually the one letting off steam, not him. For some reason, I also get the feeling that he’ll do just fine on his own.

“His current problem is his grades… I haven’t told him this yet, but his mother says she can send him to a private school if the worst happens, so everything should work out in the end.”

He’ll still have to work hard, though.

“There isn’t anything else that worries me about him,” Sensei says in an unusually teacher-like tone.

“…I see. I shouldn’t meddle too much, then.”

Sakurako-san lets out a gentle sigh of relief.

“Were you that worried?” Sensei says, trying to stifle his laughter.

“I-I was not! It’s only because Ume was worried!”

“Aren’t you going to be lonelier than he is, Kujo-san?”

Sakurako-san’s cheeks turn red as Sensei laughs at her. She doesn’t say that he’s wrong.

“…I think you should pursue higher education, too.” Sensei says to Sakurako-san before she leaves.

He seems fed up with my persistent effort to wipe the board clean, and starts wiping it down with his own cloth.

“What?”

“If you wanted to, I bet you could get into any university, either in Japan or abroad.”

Sensei folds up his cloth and wipes the dust from his hands. I agree. I don’t think she would have trouble getting into any university she wanted. Sakurako-san stands up from her chair, and looks at Sensei with a puzzled expression.

“I don’t need to-“

“You wouldn’t have to be an expert in the field, just a regular professional. Everyone in that field is a weirdo, so I’m sure you would fit right in.” Sensei interjects before Sakurako-san can reject his idea.

He’s unusually serious. In fact, he almost looks a little bit angry.

“I don’t think of other people as friends, and I don’t care about what happens to anyone other than myself, so I’ll only say this once. Sakurako Kujou, you need to move on with your life. You’re wasting your talent.”

I always thought of Sakurako-san as being taller than Isozaki-sensei, but seeing them standing next to each other, I notice that he’s taller than her. Sakurako-san looks straight at Sensei, then drops her gaze to the floor.

“You’re right… I’m at the point in my life where I have to make a decision.”

She looks up again, smiling this time, but she somehow looks sad. I feel something similar to impatience , like I’m losing something.

I don’t know how to put my feelings into words, so I just say, “I’ll support you.”

“I’ll support you, too, Yuriko.”

Sakurako-san pats my arm, then leaves the classroom just as suddenly as she arrived. She pauses once she gets out the door.

“Isozaki.”

Rather than reply to his name being called, Isozaki-sensei simply tilts his head to the side.

“You like flowers, don’t you? Why didn’t you pursue a career working with them?”

Sensei forces a smile, and mutters something about how he’s been asked questions like that a lot today.

“Because I don’t want to do what I love as a job. I want to live a rich, full life, so I’d rather enjoy my hobby than let my love for it wither away as a job.”

His smile is calm and collected. He waves his hands to shoo Sakurako-san out of the room without even saying goodbye. It’s an answer that suits him. I’m sure he’s very busy, but he values his personal time. He may not seem very teacher-like, but he definitely lives his life the way he wants to.

“But for an awkward person like you, it’s better to pick a job doing something you love and wither away. That makes a lot of people happy, but it definitely isn’t for me.” Sensei says with an evil laugh.

Sakurako-san laughs, too.

“As you said, I like to work hard until I wear myself to the bones,” she says before she leaves the classroom, still laughing.

I realize that not only do I not have anything I want to do with my life, but I also don’t have anything I’m passionate enough about to work that hard. Tears start streaming down my cheeks. In the end, that’s all there is. I don’t have a career in mind, and I got led astray by the butterfly man because I’m a hollow shell of a person. I’m so frustrated and embarrassed by myself.

“…There’s no need to worry,” Sensei suddenly says.

I’m even more frustrated that I’m crying over something like this. I desperately try to hold back the tears so I don’t seem weak.

“What?”

“There’s no need to worry so much about your future right now. You’ll figure it out someday. Yuriko, you haven’t figured it out yet, so you don’t need to pretend like you have. You don’t need to figure out your whole life before university.”

“But…”

“Lilies are most beautiful 3 years after they’ve been planted. As long as you take good care of the bulb, they’ll keep blooming

beautifully year after year. It's not a bad thing that they take a long time to grow. It's never too late to start something new, no matter how old you are, so you don't need to decide anything right now."

After saying all of that, Sensei lets out a big sigh.

"In saying that, I'll get in trouble if you don't give me some kind of suitable answer, like going to university, by the end of next week."

He frowns in annoyance. Even though I'm causing trouble for him, he's still carefully considering my future… Well, at least there's no hurry.

"Okay… I'll do something about it by then."

Sensei seems really reliable today. I feel like I have the courage to take a step forward.

"Really? Then let's draw a ghost leg on this nice, clean blackboard."

"What?! You want me to decide on my future with a game?!"

I take back what I thought before. He really isn't cut out to be a teacher. But I also want to live life my own way, just like him.